

# IN SEARCH OF IDENTITY

Jewish Aspects in Israeli Culture

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# Secular Judaism and Its Prospects

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I want to discuss a variety of meanings one can attribute to the term 'secular Judaism'. I then want to assess the prospects for the development and transmission of secular Judaism in Israel.

Two points merit mention by way of introduction. Much of what I have to say on this topic, indeed much of what I have to say about Judaism in Israel, is a commentary, an elaboration on, and an occasional demurral from, the work of Eliezer Schweid whose brilliant contribution to Jewish intellectual history evokes the work of Yehezkel Kaufman in his epic *Golah Ve-nechar* and in some ways surpasses him. I would be flattered were someone to describe me as a student of Schweid. My only excuse for writing anything at all on this topic is that Schweid and I often address different audiences and that we rely to some extent on different scholarly traditions: he on philosophical and historical-intellectual traditions, I on social science.

Secondly, my interest in the topic is a political one. My concern with secular Judaism stems from my hope that it is capable of generating a national vision with the capacity to animate Israeli society, at least its Jewish sector, and with a level of culture that ennobles its adherents.

I noticed a few years ago that important post-Zionist thinkers were ready to deny the existence of secular Judaism. Post-Zionists, I suspect, are quite content to concede Judaism to the religious since this facilitates the de-Judaization of the State of Israel. If Judaism is basically a 'religion' as Boaz Evron argues,<sup>1</sup> and as Baruch Kimmerling suggests,<sup>2</sup> if civil religion is indistinguishable from traditional religion as is suggested in Shmuel Hasfari's *Hametz* and the popular anti-religious play *Fleischer*,<sup>3</sup> then 'separating religion from State' means separating Judaism from the state. But the former objective has far greater appeal. One may argue

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over the meaning of 'separation of religion from State', but as a slogan it attracts support from a majority of Israelis. According to the comprehensive 1993 study by the Louis Guttman Institute, 54 per cent of Israeli Jews favour the separation of religion and state.<sup>4</sup> Post-Zionists and the religious establishment are joined in at least one ideological alliance; both deny or dismiss the positive features of secular Judaism and define it as no more than an ersatz watered down version of Judaism.

Attributing a political agenda to the analysis of secular Judaism is a double-edged sword. I have come to the conviction that the Jewish religion should be separated from the state, if only for its own sake. If that is to happen and Israel is to remain a Jewish State then the content and meaning of secular Judaism is a central order of concern. I do not intend discussing the Jewish parameters of such a state but only to note that to those like myself who believe that the Jewish people are entitled to a state of their own – that is, a state which reflects their ethnopolitical interests and their cultural heritage – it is necessary to establish that this cultural heritage, albeit transformed and transvalued to suit the needs of a contemporary society, is a meaningful category and refers to something more than a state of Jews. On the other hand, Jewish culture, even secular Jewish culture, can never mean the same thing as French culture or English culture, the culture of a national state, for the simple reason that Jews are not the only nation who reside in the territory of the state and Jews also reside outside the territorial state.

Given the importance of demonstrating the viability of secular Jewish culture, the obvious danger is that my own political agenda will dictate my analysis. The reader will have to judge the essay in this light.

### THE COMPONENTS OF JUDAISM

I can only approach the question of the meaning of secular Judaism by trying to understand what is meant by Judaism. I believe that Judaism has three components: ethnic, cultural and religious. The components are of course interrelated, but for analytical purposes they are distinguishable. The ethnic component is the easiest to understand. It involves the special concerns and commitments that one Jew feels for another by virtue of the fact that the other is Jewish. The ethnic tie is a family-like tie based on the sense that Jews are, in some way, biologically tied to one another. The fact that the biological ties are mythical and that many Jews are aware of their mythic quality is irrelevant as long as they behave as though the myth expresses a reality.

The cultural component is the most difficult to understand because 'culture' or the 'concept of culture' is the most elusive. Most of us have a common sense notion of what culture means. We do not have a problem understanding one another when we use the term in every day discourse, even though the term is used in two different senses. We talk

about culture in the sense of a cultured person; one who is cultivated, genteel, knowledgeable about matters of art, music, literature. Secondly, we talk about the cultures of various societies or various strata by which we mean something else. It is this 'something else' that we have so much difficulty in specifying even when we have a good enough idea about what it means. When Soviet ideological chief Mikhail Suslov declared that Jewish literary expression was no longer necessary since 'there was no point in reviving a dead culture',<sup>5</sup> the term 'culture' was clear. It is equally clear in the letter addressed to President Zalman Shazar by a group of Minsk Jews who explained their wish to live in Israel by 'the natural human desire ... to live in close contact with Jewish national culture and to acquaint one's children with this culture of which we are now deprived'.<sup>6</sup> The relative clarity of the term for purposes of discussion has not resolved the problem of formal definition. In fact, as I discovered to my chagrin, reading what has recently been written by sociologists and anthropologists on the topic (and these are the disciplines upon which I rely most heavily) is more confusing than helpful. And the more recent the literature, the more confusing it becomes. Hence, I was pleased to find a recent definition that relies heavily on the older literature and, unlike some current definitions, does not stray very far from our common sense notion of what culture means. According to Christopher Clausen:

The word *culture*, when used anthropologically rather than honorifically, refers to the total way of life of a discrete society, its traditions, habits, beliefs and art – 'the systematic body of learned behavior which is transmitted from parents to children' as Margaret Mead summarized it in 1959.<sup>7</sup>

One must also add that the products of the culture which are part of the 'way of life' are symbolic as well as material. As an early textbook in sociology noted: culture is 'a system of socially acquired and socially transmitted standards of judgement, belief, and conduct, as well as the symbolic and material products of the resulting conventional patterns of behaviour'.<sup>8</sup> What this definition lacks, as I indicate at the conclusion of this essay, is a specific reference to the constraints that culture places upon the individual. But this need not bother us for purposes of the immediate discussion.

Given the definition of culture referred to above, one can discuss both Jewish culture and Jewish subcultures over time and over place. Culture is not static. It is both transformed and its symbols are transvalued. But what characterizes a living and self-conscious culture is that many of the changes it undergoes tend to be imposed backwards in time so that the thread of the culture remains identifiable. 'Tradition' is the culture of the past as it is interpreted in the present.

Ethnicity is an important focus of Judaic or Jewish culture. But it stretches the meaning of Jewish ethnicity, as I understand it, to simply

subsume it under the rubric of Jewish culture rather than argue, as I do, that the categories are analytically distinguishable. One may find Jews, large numbers in the United States for example, who have a minimal association with Jewish culture but nevertheless retain strong ethnic ties. I cannot dismiss the argument that this is a sign that Jewish ethnicity is the lowest common denominator of Jewish culture and that what one finds, among such Jews, is an attenuated form of Jewish culture. One can argue that whereas ethnicity involves claims of common biological ties, and this distinguishes it quite clearly from culture, these ties are putative or mythical, derivative from cultural definitions. I recognize the thrust of such arguments but nevertheless find it more helpful to distinguish culture from ethnicity than collapse the latter category into the former. More important, for purposes of my argument, is to distinguish Jewish culture as an object of understanding – a Gentile may be more familiar with and knowledgeable about Jewish culture than a Jew – from participation in that culture. Culture is defined in terms of process, ‘the total way of life of a discrete society’, and in terms of its literary, musical, artistic product. The two, however, may be alienated from each other and I wish to argue that this is the present predicament of secular culture in Israel. In fact, part of the audience for secular Jewish culture in Israel may be Israelis who only participate in Jewish culture in the most marginal manner. On the other hand, there are Jews, in Israel for example, who know little about Jewish culture but whose judgement, beliefs and conduct are permeated by a Jewish way of life that is not necessarily religious.

This brings us to the third component of Judaism: the Jewish religion. I understand religion as a set of beliefs and rituals which relate the religious adherent to the transcendent, to God. In one respect, the distinction between religion and culture is entirely arbitrary. One can define religion as culture. Against this definition, one could argue that the thrust of contemporary Jewish culture has been the distinction between religion and secular culture.<sup>9</sup> The argument that the Jewish tradition, from its very outset, was ‘a unique cultural-historical creation’ rather than a ‘tradition of Divine revelation in its traditional sense’<sup>10</sup> lay at the heart of the efforts to construct secular Jewish culture beginning in the early nineteenth century. And Reform Judaism, on the other hand, was born in an effort to affirm that Judaism constituted a religion, divorced not only from its national but from ‘almost all its cultural components’.<sup>11</sup> But one might still argue that religion is culture and what the advocates of secular Jewish culture and Reform Judaism are really doing is defining the content of Jewish culture.

My reason for choosing to differentiate between religion and culture is because in one important respect ‘religion as culture’ only provides a partial understanding of religion. Viewing religion as culture is an observer’s perspective, whether the observer is or is not an adherent of the religion. This view is helpful in describing and analysing religion

from a distance. But phenomenologically, this is inadequate. We also need to view religion from the perspective of the religious adherent when he or she is, to use an awkward but telling phrase, 'doing religion'. When the religious adherent is performing a ritual in a self-conscious manner, or praying in a conscious rather than a routine manner, or undergoing a religious experience of one kind or another (and in the Jewish tradition none of this happens routinely and without some effort), then God becomes manifest to the adherent, and the process is so peculiarly religious that it is misleading to describe it as cultural.

#### THE MEANING OF SECULAR JUDAISM

Once we accept that the Jewish religion can be distinguished from Jewish culture and Jewish ethnicity, it is evident that secular Judaism is possible. It can mean a number of things. Let us look at each of them in turn.

Secular Judaism could mean ethnic and cultural Judaism without any form of religion, either religion as culture or 'doing religion'. This is theoretically possible but difficult to conceive in practice because the overlap between religion and culture in Judaism is so pronounced. To remove all the religious elements from Jewish culture would mean divorcing it from its own tradition. Culture, by its very definition, must be rooted in a past. To quote Schweid:

The secret of the vitality of culture is its historical continuation and continuity. Culture develops in organic form from its sources, and the national self exists by preserving the continuity of secular national consciousness from generation to generation.<sup>12</sup>

Removing all traces of religion might leave one with a vestige of culture, though it is not clear at all that what was left would be recognizably Jewish. Perhaps this is what some people once meant by the term 'Hebrew culture', but it is difficult for me to conceive of any culture which is meaningful yet which is rooted entirely in the present. I suspect that this is what led the Canaanite movement to invent a mythic past for their Hebraic culture. There are limited circles of secular Jews in Israel who call themselves humanist and who seek ritual and ceremonial alternatives to the Jewish religion. Some of these 'humanists' seek to reinvest traditional Jewish symbols with secular humanist meaning (see below). This is an enterprise that Zionism has engaged in from its earliest years with varying degrees of success. But a few would abolish these symbols altogether.<sup>13</sup>

A more practical and in my opinion attractive definition of secular Judaism is one that retains the religious component but affirms religion as culture rather than religion which mandates a relationship to God. This is, it seems to me, the characteristic approach of the Jewish enlightenment and the non-religious movements that developed out of the enlightenment, including of course Zionism. In other words, secular

Judaism of this kind retains a religious component. It recognizes that religion constituted the major if not exclusive content of the Jewish culture of the past. The inability of the religious culture to provide a credible conceptual framework to explain the Jewish condition in eastern Europe and its consequent inability to mobilize effectively in defence of Jewish ethnic interests, served as a major impetus to the development of secular Judaism in its contemporary national form. Many efforts were made in the period of the Yishuv and the early years of the State to create a series of rituals and ceremonies that affirmed the Jewish religion by reinterpreting it in social and national terms. The most interesting efforts in this direction were made by various *kibbutzim*,<sup>14</sup> but all of this proved of limited success. Not surprisingly, this form of secular Judaism is all too ready to pay its respects to religion and finds itself hindered by the insistence of contemporary 'religious' Jews to define Judaism in exclusively religious terms and impose its definitions, in practice as well as in theory, on all other Jews.

There is a third mode of describing secular Judaism, one which can embrace the second definition but which lays stress on the popular aspect of culture; on the notion of culture as the total way of life of a society, its traditions, habits and beliefs. This is the culture that characterizes the vast majority of Israeli Jews, according to the recent study by the Louis Guttman Institute of the religious beliefs, attitudes and behaviour of Israeli Jews referred to above.<sup>15</sup> In a summary statement about the results of that survey, Elihu Katz, one of the study's co-authors, reaches four conclusions that are relevant for our purposes. The most observant Israeli Jews constitute 25 to 30 per cent of the sample. The vast majority of Israelis are not 'religious' in the conventional meaning of that term. But, first of all, Katz notes, they do observe many traditional *mitzvot*, and while their observance is partial and selective, it is not random, individual and unsystematic. Second, these observances are not without intent; they may lack 'proper' intent from a religious perspective but they are motivated by a conscious commitment to the continuity of the Jewish People. Third, those who observe these *mitzvot* are not without belief; indeed religious faith is widespread but, and here one finds the greatest evidence for a living form of secular Judaism, the majority of Israelis part company with observant Jews because, in their own minds, that which they do practice is not dictated by God; they are aware of their 'deviations', and are unperturbed by them.<sup>16</sup> In other words, contrary to what is sometimes said, most Israeli Jews observe the tradition in part but do not believe that their pattern stems from laziness, laxity or negligence. They are participating in a patterned form of observance which is not Halacha, but which they have transformed into the folkways of secular Judaism. Whether Israeli Jews can continue to sustain these folkways is another question. Whether they might evolve into patterns that are no longer distinctively Jewish is a question for the future.

At present, however, this form of secular Judaism is alive, though not entirely well. It tends to be overlooked or dismissed because we are looking elsewhere for signs of secular Judaism and we have preconceptions, based on the secular Hebrew culture of the Yishuv, about how it will look. Those who practice secular Judaism are not *halutzim* who plough the land with one hand while they hold a book in the other. They are certainly not the 'enlightened public' in whom Chief Justice Aharon Barak places so much authority. That 'enlightened public', which is in effect Israel's 'new class',<sup>17</sup> is quite alienated from any kind of Judaism though I am not prepared to give up hope for recovering its sympathies. The breeding grounds for Israeli secular Judaism is found among a population group that may be more familiar with *Adon Olam* than with Brenner. Their secularism is neither rebellious nor anti-religious.

#### THE PROSPECTS FOR SECULAR JUDAISM

My interest in secular Judaism, I stated at the outset, was in its capacity to generate a national vision, to serve as a major mode by which the cultural heritage of the past is transmitted to the present generation. My assumption has been that much of this is done through the medium of or the support of the state; through its public policies, its symbols and ceremonials, its national holidays, its educational system and the financial support and status it provides to cultural activity that accords with its goals. I believe that secular Judaism, its culture in particular, is in danger of being overwhelmed by both Jewishly religious culture (among a minority of Israeli Jews) and Jewishly neutral culture (among a majority). Ruth Gavison in a very important article makes a similar point:

It is the opponents of *halacha*, committed to the idea of Israel as a Jewish nation-state, who must explain the particular content of Jewish nationalism. They are the ones who must transmit this answer to the new generation of Israelis who didn't arrive here by virtue of the 'Zionist revolution'; as a consequence of a deep existential struggle with their personal identity. If they don't have an answer, we can anticipate two possible developments: the vacuum will be filled with Jewish religious content, with all its separatist principles, or all Israeli-Jews will be a people who speak Hebrew (and among some of them their Hebrew is poor and defective), but lacking any special orientation to the national Jewish culture.<sup>18</sup>

I have little confidence in the ability of secular Judaism to compete, at least at the present, in the open marketplace unless answers are forthcoming and steps are taken to strengthen it.

I have already suggested that if secular Judaism is understood as Judaism less its religious component, it is left virtually bereft of culture.



All that remains is the ethnic component. In the unlikely case that Jewish ethnicity could be sustained in the contemporary world without religion or culture, it would likely degenerate into some form of racism. I may be fooling myself, but I would like to believe that at least some supporters of Beitar Yerushalayim who shout 'death to the Arabs' when Beitar plays the Arab team from Taybeh are ethnic Jews bereft of Jewish culture. My fear, reinforced by the 1994 Carmel Institute study of high school youth,<sup>19</sup> is that most are part of that majority of the culturally traditional albeit non-religious Israelis to whom the Guttman study refers. If that is correct it reinforces my fears about the gap between the artists and intellectuals who produce Jewish culture and the human products of that culture.

The second definition of secular Judaism involved a recognition of religion's formative role in Jewish culture but a rejection of religion's significance to the individual; religion as culture without 'doing religion'. Religion is acknowledged as a critical force in shaping the Jewish culture of the past. We recognize the Jewish religion, religious symbols and religious artefacts, even many religious values as part of our heritage, and we assimilate them into our culture including our political culture. This does not mean that we accept the religious mandates or injunctions or beliefs as compelling in our own lives. And because we are not ourselves 'religious', we transform and secularize religious symbols, artefacts and values. In many respects, this is an ideal form of secular Judaism. For those anxious to preserve a Jewish state without the burden of religious coercion and with a democratic form of government, this would seem to be a perfect solution. In some respects it describes our present society, but in other respects it is misleading because this is not the direction in which Israeli society is headed.

The civil religion of Israel which Don-Yehiya and I describe in our own study fits this description.<sup>20</sup> Religious symbols are utilized in the construction of a system of myths and rituals that serve to legitimate the social order and integrate and mobilize the Jewish population, though the religious symbols themselves undergo transformation and transvaluation and God plays no role in this quasi-religion. Civil religion may not have satisfied the spiritual needs of the individual in the quest to find meaning in one's personal life. On the other hand, those individuals whose personal identity was merged into the collective national identity also found personal satisfaction in the civil religion.

At the conclusion of our study, published in 1983, in the wake of the War in Lebanon, Don-Yehiya and I suggested our own reservations about the level of commitment that the civil religion was capable of evoking. Our reservations of the past are certitudes of today. In the absence of survey research data, the evidence for the decline is admittedly partial and impressionistic. But it cannot be overlooked. For example, the Israeli media have provided extensive publicity in the last few years to studies that question the stature, heroism and motivation of Israel's founders

and early pre-state heroes. Television dramas have been produced and shown in the same sceptical vein. These studies may have occasioned some dissent; but their publication in the press and their airing on public TV suggests that Israeli society is far less appreciative today than it once was of civil religion's mythical heroes.<sup>21</sup>

An excellent example of the decline of Israeli civil religion is the recent theatre production of the play *Hametz* by the popular Israeli playwright Shmuel Hasfari. The play, at least on the evening I saw it, was warmly received and to the best of my knowledge it has not been condemned in the media. In fact, it was awarded the Israeli theatre's most prestigious prize for the best Israeli play of 1995. Its theme is that Israeli society ought to forget its past, ignore its ostensible heroes, forget even the Holocaust and the six million who died, and live as a normal society with no special attachments to anything that is peculiarly Jewish.

Israel's willingness to enter into a peace agreement with the Palestinians is attributable at least in part to recognition by the political and military elite that Israel has already been overtaken by the demand for individual autonomy and material comfort – a demand that erodes if not shatters any ideological or symbolic system which provides a communitarian society with meaning. As the Israeli army's Chief of Staff Amnon Shahak noted, commenting on the apparent rise in the number of young Israelis who consider military service 'inappropriate': 'The problem is a preference for individualism over the collective in an age of liberalism'.<sup>22</sup> Minister of Defence Yitzhak Mordecai is quoted as expressing concern with 'the lowered motivation of youth to serve in combat units in the IDF'.<sup>23</sup> Efraim Inbar of Bar-Ilan University describes this continued decline in the percentage of Israeli youth who volunteer for combat units and observes that Israeli leaders realize that their society 'displays signs of fatigue and is more reluctant to pay the price for the protracted conflict with the Arabs'.<sup>24</sup> He notes that former army chief-of-staff Ehud Barak:

often expressed concern about Israel's social fiber. For example, he described the changes in Israeli society: '... accumulated weariness and cynicism, accompanied by an aggressive and intrusive media, depreciation of the Zionist deeds, the development of a cleavage in the consensus over Israel's political goals, even over the use of force (we have seen it in Lebanon and in the Intifada) – all these create a perception as well as a reality of weakness'.<sup>25</sup>

Sharper tones are present in a more recent article by *Ha-aretz* columnist and television host Dan Margalit, who characteristically phrases himself with care and balance. According to Margalit, there is more than one reason for the reduced motivation among Israeli youth to enlist in combat units:

Israeli society has become materialistic and consumer oriented. Some of the parents and the media have projected self-fulfillment

and the good of the individual as prior to any public commitment. Zionism has been pushed behind the word 'post', Judaism has assumed an ultra-Orthodox coloration ...<sup>26</sup>

Other signs of the decline of civil religion include the transformation of civil religious celebrations into private events. A good example is the decline of Independence Day as a major national holiday, and the transfer of celebrations from massive events to more intimate family barbecues in public parks.<sup>27</sup>

One way of viewing the decline of civil religion is in its inability to evoke commitment to the Israeli or Jewish collective and to mobilize the population, at least the Jewish segment of the population for social goals. But since our particular concern is with the assimilation of Jewish values into the civil religion – that is, into the political culture – the recent concern over the issue of Judaism and democracy is of special relevance. The notion of a virtually irreconcilable conflict between Judaism and democracy is taken for granted in most of the debate on the topic despite the fact that according to some outstanding scholars this dichotomy is hardly as sharp as the protagonists in the debate suggest.<sup>28</sup> I am not concerned with the issue of who is right and who is wrong. My own opinion is that whereas one finds major themes within the religious tradition that are inimical to democracy, there are minor themes and minority opinions in the sacred texts themselves that affirm almost all the major values of liberal democracy.<sup>29</sup> What is remarkable, therefore, is that the intellectual, political, and cultural elite in Israeli society has ignored rather than sought to transform these elements of the Jewish religion into normative values. Much in the religion was transformed: for example, religious holidays celebrating man's relationship to God were transformed into national holidays celebrating the achievements of 'the nation'. Hence, the failure to adapt the liberal elements within the religious tradition into contemporary Judaism is of significance.

The answer as to why this has not occurred is, in my opinion, a matter of timing. My guess is that had the issue of Judaism and democracy arisen forty years ago, at least one segment of the country's elite, that identified with MAPAI rather than with MAPAM, would have argued forcefully that Judaism and Jewish values were entirely consistent with those of a democratic society. They would not only have cited traditional text but the conduct of the east European Jewish community. I do not think that the religious Zionist elite would have challenged them on this score. But had they done so, the secular elite would have been relatively untroubled because of their own sense that the cultural tradition, as distinct from halachic norms, was as much theirs to interpret as it was that of the religious public; that what they felt in their hearts was of necessity the strains and echoes of the authentic tradition. The story of the argument between David Ben-Gurion and the first Minister of Religion, Yehudah Leib Maimon (Fishman), is instructive in

this regard. When Ben-Gurion refused Maimon's demand that government offices be closed on the fast of Esther and Maimon challenged Ben-Gurion on his basis for refusing the demand, the Prime Minister noted that he was as familiar with what went on in the traditional Jewish towns of eastern Europe as was Maimon. Today this kind of Jewish self-assurance is entirely lacking among secular political leaders, not to mention the cultural elite. Their tendency is to defer to the religious elite in terms of what Judaism means. Indeed, much of the cultural elite are happy to defer to the religious elite since it facilitates the construction of polar models for a society; Jewish as opposed to democratic.

The decline not only of civil religion but of national commitment is well reflected in an article by Gideon Samet in *Ha-aretz*. His column reflects what I consider to be a major if not a dominant motif in contemporary Israeli society. According to Samet:

For some time now, commentators on identity put their finger on our [growing] normalization. They noted the growing tendency to move from nationalist slogans to simple individualism. ... the lust for life.

... Madonna and Big Mac are only the outer periphery of a far-reaching process whose basis is not American influence but a growing tendency throughout the west, especially among young people. It is a mistake to attribute this to the product of a foreign identity.

On the contrary, the new language is comprised of new forms of cultural consumption and leisure activity that have become supra-national. So it is with popular music, movies, trips abroad, dress and even the style of speech.<sup>30</sup>

Samet's article puts its finger on the problem of secular Judaism. Secular Judaism faces competition on two fronts. One is on the religious front; a point to which I will return. But its more immediate problem at present is that it is also in competition with modern or postmodern western culture. As Schweid points out, the goal of those who created modern secular Jewish culture, especially that which he refers to as Hebrew culture, was to retain an historical continuity with the Jewish past while transforming the cultural identity of the new Jew into modern European forms. I believe as an observer that one, two and even three generations back could have felt assured that secular Judaism was successful in absorbing both traditional Jewish forms as well as modern European forms into an indigenous culture. By culture, I remind you, I refer not only to literature and art and the symbolic productions of culture but to the total way of life of a discrete society, its traditions, habits and beliefs. There is reason to doubt this today. We have not absorbed or assimilated these cultures as much as subjected ourselves to them. As Samet, correctly in my opinion, points out, the dominant

culture of many Israeli Jews is not secular Judaism but the kind of hybrid postmodern culture common to all the West with which he feels so comfortable.

This statement raises a number of questions. First, am I not underestimating the power of language in guaranteeing the survival of an independent Jewish culture. Indeed, it is Schweid himself, generally a voice of gloom, who attributes major importance to language as the primary instrument in the creation and preservation of a distinct culture. Much of the concluding section of his study of Jewish culture is a paean of praise to the accomplishments of the Zionists in their revival-transformation of Jewish culture through the medium of Hebrew. Second, if Samet is correct, how does one account for the results of the Guttman study reported above?

With regard to language, I do not find Schweid's analysis entirely persuasive. I certainly reject the notion that anything produced in Hebrew is *ipso facto* a product of Jewish culture. Secondly, were I to concede Schweid's point about the early importance of the Hebrew language in forging a new Jewish culture, his cultural analysis of the past strengthens the importance of the new wave of 'street literature', an attempt to flatten the language in Israeli literature, rid it of all biblical, liturgical or rabbinic allusion.<sup>31</sup> This linguistic post-Zionism, emptying the Hebrew language of its cultural baggage, as Rochelle Furstenberg points out,<sup>32</sup> reflects a major change in contemporary Israeli culture, a point that Yosef Dan made a few years ago in an article in *Ha-aretz*.<sup>33</sup>

But what about evidence from the Guttman Institute survey of Israeli Jews which seems to demonstrate the continuing vitality of secular Jewish culture at the popular level? And there is additional evidence in this regard. The 1994 survey of high school youth conducted by the Carmel Institute asked Israeli Jewish youth if they felt more Israeli or more Jewish. Fifty-one per cent said they felt equally Israeli and Jewish. Twenty nine per cent said they felt more Jewish, whereas 20 per cent said they felt more Israeli.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, the Carmel Institute finds that Jewish identity is about the same as it was in a comparable study conducted in 1984.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, whatever one may say about the values of Israeli youth in general, the Carmel study finds that they have remained fairly constant compared to those reported in a 1988 study. Similar results were obtained in Guttman Institute studies from 1974 and 1976. So the question about the prospects of secular Judaism remains open. There is evidence for the forceful presence of Jewish culture in Israeli society and contradictory evidence of its gradual diminution. The argument also depends, to some extent, on the kind of evidence one accepts as authoritative. But it is no less important to appreciate that the vast majority of Israelis live with conflicting value systems. The powerful and pervasive nature of the secular, individualistic, consumption orientated values in western society suggests that almost all Israelis, including many of the more observant, will have internalized some of them to some

degree. So the set of values which provide an alternative to the tradition are certainly present. The mistake is to believe that they have entirely replaced more traditional Jewish values.

The Guttman Report demonstrates that whereas less than a quarter, and perhaps only a fifth, of Israeli Jews are 'religious', close to four-fifths testify to their observing at least some aspects of the Jewish tradition. Even among the remaining fifth, among those who identify themselves as 'totally non-observant', a majority are at least partially observant. For example, only 6 per cent of the total sample report that they seldom or never participate in a Passover *seder* and 12 per cent that they seldom or never light Hannuka candles. Israelis score quite high on measures of observance. But two caveats must be added. The first is that the non-observant are the best educated and overwhelmingly Ashkenazi. Independent evidence, on the other hand, suggests that the commitment to traditional Jewish practice among Sephardim is declining much more rapidly than it is among Ashkenazim.<sup>36</sup> The non-observant, although constituting a distinct minority of Israeli Jews, probably constitute a large section if not a majority of its academic, intellectual and cultural elite and are firmly ensconced in the media as well.

Secondly, we do not know what difference this orientation to tradition makes in the lives of most Israeli Jews. We have a vast literature on visiting the tombs of holy men. But in general, we do not have studies of how Israeli Jews in general, and the non-religious in particular, celebrate *britot*, *bar* or *bat-mitzvot*, birthdays and weddings, Jewish holidays, national holidays, or non-Jewish holidays such as Christmas and the secular New Year. We do have some limited material on funerals and private memorials but it is insufficient.<sup>37</sup> Such studies need to inform us of similarities and differences by *edah*, by age group, by education, by level of observance, and by generation in Israel. Only then can we pretend to know the manner in which the Jewish heritage is or is not integrated into contemporary Israeli culture. Of course, many matters would still be subject to individual judgement. In August 1996, Aviv Gefen was married in a wedding ceremony which the Israeli media covered in as much detail as they could. I have trouble interpreting the significance of that event. Is the fact that Aviv Gefen got married at all significant? Is the fact that he was married in a Jewish wedding significant? Is the fact that his marriage was Conservative rather than Orthodox significant or is it significant that he chose to have a Conservative wedding which is closer to the tradition rather than a Reform wedding?

We may have overestimated the level of integration of the Jewish tradition in Israeli culture. It is commonplace to observe that virtually all Israelis celebrate the *seder*. The Guttman Report findings confirms this. But we know very little about how the *seder* is celebrated. There is firm evidence that the traditional *haggada* rather than the innovative *haggadot* that characterized kibbutz *seders* from thirty to sixty years ago are used.

But we do not know what role this plays in the *seder*. Shlomo Deshen, in a forthcoming paper based on reports from his own students at Tel-Aviv University, notes that reading the *haggada* is accompanied by disparaging remarks, sometimes of a lewd nature, about the text.<sup>38</sup> Tel-Aviv University students are hardly a cross-section of Israeli society but one has the feeling that at least among a substantial proportion of Ashkenazi Jews, the rituals and ceremonials that are observed are becoming increasingly emptied of significance. But we really do not know enough, as Deshen points out. This is an area that strikes me as critical to understanding Israeli culture, and Israeli sociologists and anthropologists would do well to explore it.

In fact, we may have underestimated the impact of the tradition on contemporary Jewish culture. The 1996 election results are one indication. The overwhelming majority that the religious and right wing parties obtained among the Jewish electorate is attributable in no small measure to the fears of many Israeli Jews that the continuation of a MERETZ-Labour coalition threatened Jewish culture and Jewish values as they are presently expressed in the policies of the state. (Whether these fears were well founded is immaterial to my argument.)

Even the dark side has its bright counterpart. The Shenhar Commission appointed by the Minister of Education in 1991 to examine the teaching of Judaism in the non-religious school system found that the curriculum materials, the training of the teachers, and the number of hours devoted to Jewish subjects was totally inadequate. In other words, the most forceful socializing agency that the state has at its disposal, the educational system, was not being utilized to support Jewish culture. This leaves hope that educational changes can improve the present situation. Had the Shenhar Commission been satisfied with the teaching of Judaic subjects in the school system, my concern about the prospects for secular Judaism would have been far greater.

The Holocaust, Israel-Diaspora relations, the welfare of Jews throughout the world, Jerusalem, a measure of Israeli nationalism, participation in Jewish ritual, affirmation of basic Jewish beliefs, but above all else, a powerful sense of family ties animate Israeli Jews. Indeed, family ties may provide the most important integrating force in Israeli society. The frequent references to Rabin as a 'father' which one heard from Israeli youth following his assassination are significant in this regard. They seem rather tame in contrast to the values of self-sacrifice for the sake of the collectivity, communalism and mutual assistance, and above all the value of physical labour, values that Schweid characterizes as central to the Hebrew culture of the early Zionists. On the other hand, the present set of values do seem better suited to a modern nation. But except for the value of family ties, little of this is reflected in the Israeli media and least of all Israeli theatre. The Jewish-national values that Israelis share, at admittedly varying levels of commitment, are not reflected in the products of Israel's cultural and intellectual elite.

There may be a significant gap between the cultural expression of Israeli life in its music, art and theatre and the level of Jewish concern and commitment found amongst the vast majority of Israelis. I would describe the orientations of the academic, intellectual and cultural elite of Israeli Jews in much the same manner that the late Christopher Lasch describes its American counterparts.<sup>39</sup> Members of the elite, he says, have mounted a crusade 'to extend the range of personal choice in matters where most people feel the need for solid moral guidelines'.<sup>40</sup> The majority of society appears:

to the makers of educated opinion [as] hopelessly dowdy, unfashionable, and provincial. They are at once absurd and vaguely menacing – not because they wish to overthrow the old order but precisely because their defense of it appears so deeply irrational that it expresses itself, at the higher reaches of its intensity, in fanatical religiosity, in a repressive sexuality that occasionally erupts into violence against women and gays, and in a patriotism that supports imperialist wars and a national ethic of aggressive masculinity. Simultaneously arrogant and insecure, the new elites regard the masses with mingled scorn and apprehension.<sup>41</sup>

It remains to be seen whether this putative gap between Israel's cultural elite and the majority of its citizens can be overcome, and if so in what way. Will the majority of Israeli Jews assimilate the values of its cultural elite, or will the cultural elite find a way to accommodate the Jewish orientations of the masses? In the latter case, perhaps through some combination of an emerging new elite and a change of heart among the present elite, secular Jewish culture may yet flourish in Israel.

This leaves open the question of the level at which secular Judaism is integrated into one's life. For some it is likely to remain a public or collective expression. They may seek spiritual meaning and fulfilment outside the realm of Jewish culture. Others will find aspects of secular Judaism satisfying at a more existential and spiritual level. Many, perhaps a majority, of Israelis do so today.

## CONCLUSION

There can be no secular Judaism which is not anchored in the Jewish tradition and there is no Jewish tradition that denies its religious roots. Under these assumptions, what are the prospects for secular Judaism in Israel? The verdict is not yet in. The evidence is mixed. Among the Israeli elite the impression I get is one of a growing ignorance of and indifference towards the Jewish tradition. It is easy to blame the religious establishment itself for this state of affairs. It is easy to argue that the religious elite has appropriated Judaism for itself, interpreting the traditional text and traditional values in a xenophobic, particularist, sexist manner. It has overlooked or rejected values within the Jewish



tradition that could have been beacons of visions and moral behaviour for all Israelis. Instead, it has tolerated behaviour that can only be characterized, to use its own frame of reference, as 'a desecration of God's name'. But even if the religious house of Israel is morally rotten this is not enough to explain the feeble character of secular Judaism. It is too easy to blame the religious or the secular politicians as the late Yonathan Shapiro did.<sup>42</sup> This does not answer why the secularists surrendered so easily in the battle over defining the nature of Judaism.

The answer is obvious. Secular Judaism, unlike religion, does not generate the commitment, the passion, the confidence, that religion generates in the hearts of its adherents. Not enough is at stake in the personal lives of secular Jews to activate them in conflicts over the nature of Judaism. And while we might all agree that a great deal is at stake at the public level – indeed the very future of Israel as a Jewish state may be at stake – ideological concerns no longer generate the efforts they once did. The passivity of secular Jews with regard to public issues renders them helpless in the face of the active religious public on the one hand and the assimilatory pressures of a global postmodern culture on the other.

Yet there is a communitarian spirit among Israeli Jews that is probably stronger than the communitarianism that exists in any western democracy. Israel is a small country, which means that friendship or at least acquaintance circles engulf a large proportion of the society. Were we able to list all the acquaintances of Israeli Jews, and then list all the acquaintances of the second group, we would probably find that most Israeli Jews are no more than one step or at most two steps removed from knowing every other Israeli Jew. In this respect Israeli Jews are like Orthodox Jews all over the world. Secondly, Hebrew as a first language is virtually peculiar to Israeli Jews. Acquaintance circles and language peculiarity mean that Israelis, for all that they travel and for all their exposure to the international media, are considerably more comfortable in one another's presence. It is difficult to document my own conviction that Israelis, more than any other people that I know, seek one another's company, feel peculiarly comfortable in one another's presence, and exhibit a sense of responsibility to members of their own group. This responsibility no longer extends to the state, not even to the civil society. This too is a form of Jewish culture. It is hardly a high culture. But it does form the basis and foundation upon which a more ennobling Jewish culture can be built.

The development of such a culture, however, at least at present, needs the religious as well. A.B. Ychoshua talks about the need that the secular have for the religious because of the latter's access to traditional text which forms the basis of Jewish culture.<sup>43</sup> Amos Oz states that he prefers a spiritual alliance with religious Zionism rather than a political alliance with the 'hellenizing' left.<sup>44</sup> David Grossman talks about the 'sense of mission and social commitment' of the national religious, to the

great importance they accord education, 'the vitality of learning in the yeshivot ... the ability for debate and complex dialectic analysis; and to the intellectual attraction of abstract thought'.<sup>45</sup> The reason why I believe that secular Judaism needs an alliance with the religious is that secular Jews alone do not have the will or the self-discipline that affirming a culture of responsibility and loyalty requires.

Admittedly, the prospects for secular Judaism appear problematical. But secular Judaism does exist in Israel. Part of the reason it appears so feeble is that we may have been looking for it in the wrong places. We associate secular Judaism with 'Hebrew culture', the new Jew as opposed to the 'galut Jew', with *halutzit* and with the kibbutz, and with values that conform to the noblest of western civilization. Instead, our search may lead us to the masses of Israeli Jews, *edot ha-mizrach* in particular, so many of whom are the carriers of superstitious beliefs and xenophobic attitudes. But are these my people? Unless the artisans of culture recognize them as such, unless they try to learn the sources of their attitudes and convictions, and unless they try to convey to them the sources of their conviction, the alienation between those who are the products of secular Jewish culture and those who produce secular Jewish culture will only continue to grow.

I would be pleased if the masses of Israeli Jews internalized at least some of the values associated with that which was once called 'Hebrew culture', and I certainly believe that this is a major task of our educational institutions and of the cultural elite. But this can only be done by institutions and by people who accept the Jewish tradition and the Jewish past as a starting point in their effort.

Finally, let us consider the non-religious alternative to secular Judaism more seriously. We have defined culture as the total way of life of a society, its traditions, habits and belief. We have suggested that the major alternative to Jewish culture is a de-judaized Israeli culture which absorbs the values of modern western culture with its emphasis on individual autonomy, personalism and universalism and thereby undermines Judaism as a religion and as a national culture. But perhaps we have exaggerated the force of modern western culture because we have misunderstood the nature of culture. Christopher Lasch, relying on Philip Rieff, maintains that at the heart of any culture lie *interdictions*. Quoting Rieff he says that:

Culture is a set of moral demands – 'deeply graven interdicts, etched in superior and trustworthy characters'. This is why it makes sense to describe the United States today as a 'cultureless society'. It is a society in which nothing is sacred and therefore, nothing is forbidden. An anthropologist might object that a cultureless society is a contradiction in terms, but Rieff objects to the way in which social scientists have reduced the concept of culture to a 'way of life'. According to Rieff, culture is a way of life backed up by the will to

condemn and punish those who defy its commandments. A 'way of life' is not enough. A people's way of life has to be embedded in 'sacred order' – that is, in a conception of the universe, ultimately a religious conception, that tells us 'what is not to be done'.<sup>46</sup>

As Lasch notes, whereas this definition of culture results in a sweeping condemnation of what he calls the American way of life and we call western culture, it also contains a ray of hope. Because:

if culture rests on willingness to forbid, a 'remissive' culture like our own cannot be expected to survive indefinitely. Sooner or later our remissive elites will have to rediscover the principle of limitation. The modern project may have run its course. The 'idea that men need not submit to any power ... other than their own' is by no means discredited, but it is losing its capacity to inspire heady visions of progress.<sup>47</sup>

The great advantage of living in Israel is that, unlike the *golah*, the opportunity for the recovery of the tradition and of secular Judaism is always close at hand. The literature and the essays of those who forged modern secular Judaism, and the scholarship of those who found its echoes in the distant past, may not resonate as strongly as they once did, but they are accessible to the Israeli public. We must find a way of linking this kind of cultural product to the concerns and interests of the mass of Israelis who need to become more self-conscious about the nature and meaning of their own Jewish concerns.

#### NOTES

This is a revised version of an article that appeared in Hebrew in *Alpayim*, No.14 (1997), pp.97–116.

1. Boaz Evron, *Jewish State or Israeli Nation?*, trans. with a foreword by James Diamond, (Bloomington, 1995).
2. According to Kimmerling, 'There are secular Jews in the world and in Israel, but there is grave doubt if there is such a thing as secular Judaism'. Baruch Kimmerling, 'Religion, Nationalism and Democracy in Israel', *Zmanim*, Nos. 50–1 (Winter 1994), p. 129.
3. Dan Urian, 'The Stereotype of the Religious Jew in Israeli Theater', *Assaph*, No. 10 (1994), p. 150, notes that within the play, 'many references equate the "Zionist civil religion" with the Jewish tradition'.
4. Shlomit Levy, Hanna Levinsohn and Elihu Katz, *Beliefs, Observances and Social Interaction among Israeli Jews* (Jerusalem: The Louis Guttman Israel Institute of Applied Social Research, 1993). For further elaboration of the meaning of this statement see Ch. five of Charles S. Liebman and Elihu Katz (eds), *The Jewishness of Israelis: Responses to the Guttman Report* (Albany, 1997).
5. Bernard Wasserstein, *Vanishing Diaspora: The Jews in Europe since 1945* (Cambridge MA, 1996), p. 184.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 190.
7. Christopher Clausen, 'Welcome to Post-Culturalism', *American Scholar*, 65 (Summer, 1996), p. 380.
8. G.A. Lundberg, C.C. Schrag and O.N. Larsen, *Sociology* (New York, 1963), p. 761,

- cited in William R. Catton, Jr, 'The Development of Sociological Thought', in Robert Faris (ed.), *Handbook of Modern Sociology* (Chicago, 1964), p. 946.
9. Eliezer Schweid, *The Idea of Judaism as a Culture* (Tel-Aviv, 1995).
  10. *Ibid.*, p. 63.
  11. *Ibid.*, p. 111.
  12. *Ibid.*, p. 174.
  13. These efforts and their differences of opinion are recorded on the pages of the journal *Yahadut Hofshit* (Free Judaism), a publication of the Secular Israeli Movement for a Humanist Judaism (Tnuah Hilonit Israelit Le-yahadut Humanistit).
  14. Shalom Lilker, *Kibbutz Judaism: A New Tradition in the Making* (New York, 1982).
  15. Levy, Levinsohn and Katz, *Beliefs, Observances and Social Interaction*.
  16. Elihu Katz, 'Behavioral and Phenomenological Jewishness', in Liebman and Katz (eds), *The Jewishness of Israelis*.
  17. For an illuminating discussion of this point see Ronen Shamir, 'Society, Judaism and Democratic Fundamentalism: On the Social Sources of Judicial Interpretation', in Ariel Rosen-Zvi (ed.), *A Jewish and Democratic State* (Tel-Aviv, 1996), pp. 241–60.
  18. Ruth Gavison, 'A Jewish and Democratic State Political Identity, Ideology and Law', in Rosen-Zvi, *ibid.*, p. 216.
  19. A 1994 survey of Israeli high school youth found that 49 per cent of students in state-religious schools reported that they hated Arabs compared to 33 per cent of the students in non-religious state high schools. Yaakov Ezrahi and Reuven Gal, *World Views and Attitudes of High School Students regarding Society, Security and Peace* (Zichron Yaakov, 1995), p. 68 (Hebrew).
  20. Charles S. Liebman and Eliezer Don-Yehiya, *Civil Religion in Israel: Traditional Judaism and Political Culture in the Jewish State* (Berkeley, 1983).
  21. For a summary of the debate see the cover story of the *Jerusalem Report*, 'Israel's Heroes Under Attack', 29 December 1994. The lead article by Calev Ben-David, pp. 13–19, is subtitled as follows: 'On stage and screen, in the media and history books, the myths and heroes of Israel and Zionism are being criticized, attacked and reevaluated. Is this the healthy historical revisionism of a changing society, or a growing cynicism that is undermining the country's ideological foundations?' (p. 13).
  22. *New York Times*, 31 May 1995, p. A10. The quote appears in a feature article by Clyde Haberman titled 'Israel's Army, Once Sacrosanct, Is Now Becoming Deglamourized', which adds evidence to support the thesis of the decline of Israeli civil religion. The army has, heretofore, been its central institution.
  23. *Ha-aretz*, 6 Aug. 1996, p. 4.
  24. Efraim Inbar, 'Contours of Israel's New Strategic Thinking', *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 111, No. 1 (1996), p. 56.
  25. *Ibid.*
  26. *Ha-aretz*, 8 Aug. 1996, p. 1B.
  27. Eliezer Don-Yehiya, 'Festivals and Political Culture: Independence-Day Celebrations', *Jerusalem Quarterly*, No. 45 (Winter 1988), pp. 61–84.
  28. Eliezer Schweid, 'Israel as a Jewish-Democratic State – Historical and Theoretical Perspectives', *Alpayim*, No. 11 (1995), pp. 78–89, and 'The Jewish Religion and Israeli Democracy', *Yahdaut Hofshit*, No. 7 (December 1995), pp. 24–30; Asher Maoz, 'The Values of a Jewish Democratic State', in Rosen-Zvi (ed.), *A Jewish and Democratic State*, pp. 85–169. Although he does not address the topic specifically, much material supporting the compatibility of Judaism and Democracy, especially equal treatment of the non-Jew is found in a variety of essays by the seminal biblical scholar Moshe Greenberg. For example, Moshe Greenberg, *Studies in the Bible and Jewish Thought* (Philadelphia, 1995); see especially, 'Mankind, Israel and the Nations in the Jewish Heritage', pp. 369–93.
  29. Charles S. Liebman, 'Attitudes toward Jewish-Gentile Relations in the Jewish Tradition and Contemporary Israel' (Occasional Papers, Kaplan Centre, University of Cape Town, 1984), and more recently with Steven M. Cohen, 'Jewish Political Liberalism', *Commentary*, forthcoming.
  30. Gideon Samet, 'The Nation Goes Up a Grade', *Ha-aretz* (28 July 1995), p. 1B.
  31. The new literary journal *Rechov* is the ideological flagship of this approach.
  32. Rochelle Furstenberg, 'Post-Zionism: The Promises and the Problems', forthcoming.
  33. Yosef Dan, *Ha-aretz Supplement*, 3 March 1994, pp. E1, E8.

34. Ezrahi and Gal, *World Views*, p. 124.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 182.
36. Mordechai Bar-Lev and Avraham Leslau, *The Religious World of Graduates of the Public-Religious School System* (Ramat-Gan, Bar-Ilan University, 1994) (Hebrew).
37. Nisan Rubin, 'Social Structure and Patterns of Mourning', *Hevra Ve-revava*, 5 (1987), pp. 219–31.
38. Shlomo Dshen, 'Secular Israelis on Passover Eve: Continuity, Creativity, Eradication and Profanation of Traditional Symbols', forthcoming (in Hebrew).
39. Christopher Lasch, 'The Revolt of the Elites: Have they Canceled their Allegiance to America?', *Harper's*, 289 (November 1974), pp. 39–49. The essay is adapted, with revision, from a posthumous book *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy*, published in 1995 by W.W. Norton.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 40.
41. *Ibid.*, p. 41.
42. Yonathan Shapiro, *Politicians as an Hegemonic Class: The Case of Israel* (Tel-Aviv, 1996), pp. 54ff (Hebrew).
43. *Ha-arets Supplement*, 29 Dec. 1995, pp. 20–6.
44. *Ha-zofe, Sabbath Supplement*, 8 March 1996, pp. 7, 17.
45. David Grossman, 'I Need You, and You Need Me', *Avar Ve-atid*, 3 Sep. 1996, pp. 7, 8. The article is translated from the Hebrew original that appeared in *Yediot Aharonot*, 23 November 1995.
46. Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites*, p. 222.
47. *Ibid.*, p.223.