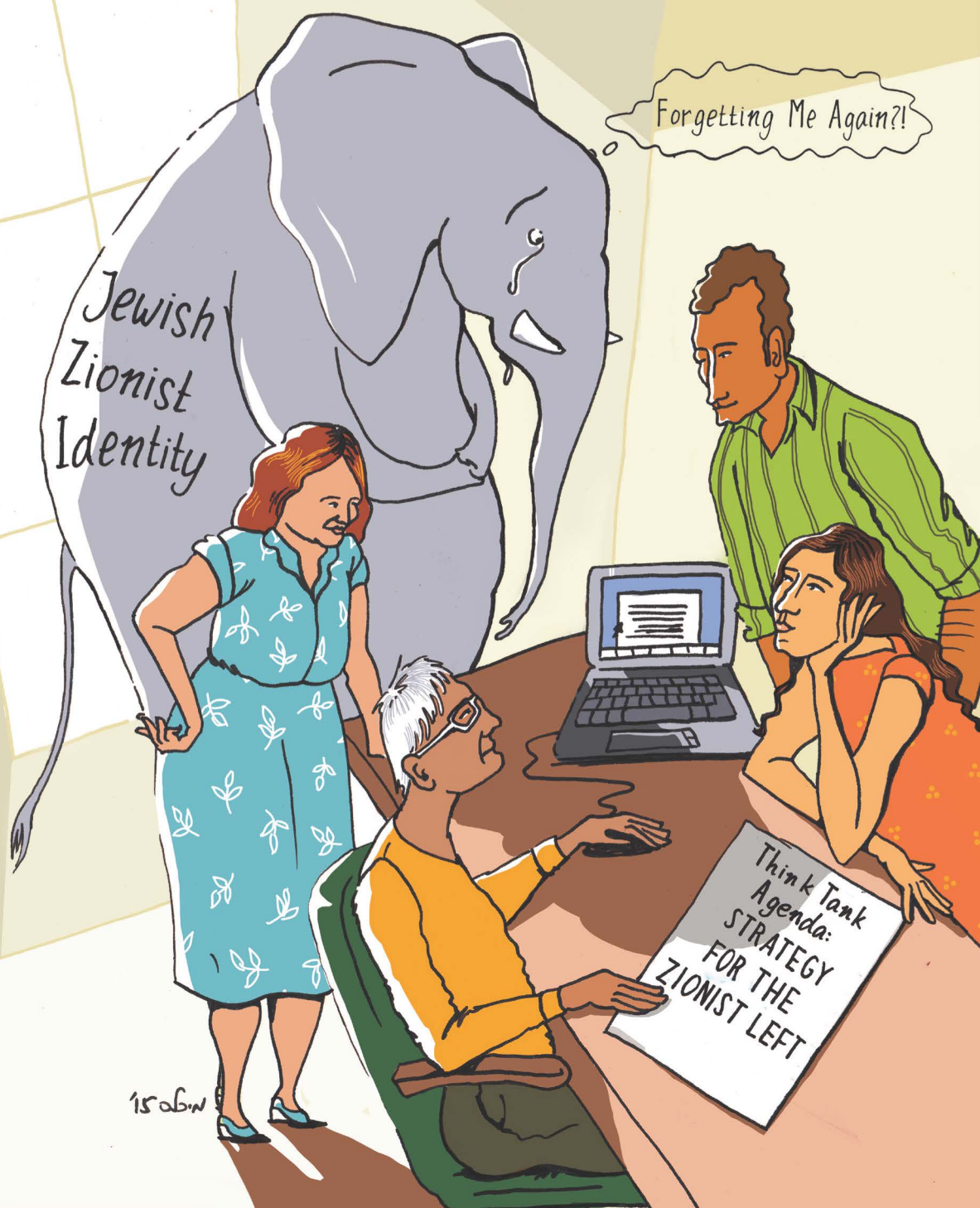


Michael Livni

The Elephant in the Room of the Zionist Left



Michael Livni

The Elephant in the Room of the Zionist Left

Second Printing
October 2018
Heshvan 5779
Dfus Haneviim
Jerusalem

Graphics, Printing and Binding - Art Plus-Dfus Yarok, Jerusalem
Translation from Hebrew: Shaul Vardi and Michael Livni
Cover - Michal Sluk
All rights reserved; Michael Livni and Amutat Tzell Hatamar, Registered Society
Kibbutz Lotan, D.N. Chevel Eilot 8885500
ISRAEL
ISBN 978-965-91791-2-1
Elul 5775 - September 2015



A Few Words of Introduction...

Firstly, due disclosure: most of this essay was written eighteen months ago, but no venue was available for its publication.

Following the Israeli elections in March 2015, the Zionist Left – those who seek social democracy in Israel – no longer have any reason to avoid a process of soul-searching (I am aware that some would argue that “left” and “social democracy” are not synonymous, but for our purposes this argument is immaterial).

The Zionist Left must reinvent itself in order to return to its original essence. Its messages must be transmitted through the prism of the Jewish heritage, since otherwise they do not speak to those who identify themselves primarily in national terms. In fact, the messages of the Zionist Left stem from our prophetic tradition. In historical terms, the Labor Zionist movement was a militant nationalist movement cloaked in Socialist garb.

The Knesset elections in 2009, 2013, and 2015 proved repeatedly that individuals define themselves first and foremost in national terms. “It’s us or the left!” – this mantra chanted by the right wing in the 2015 election campaign fed on the current image of the left: defeatist, soft, “not really Jewish”, bleeding hearts, secularists from the rich suburbs, and Arab-lovers.

Again and again it was shown that the social democratic message of social and environmental justice essentially preaches to the converted and fails to attract new audiences.

We have forgotten the lessons of the last century. The First World War showed that particularistic and nationalist sentiments create a much stronger magnetic field than universalist, humanist ideals. The Socialist movement incorporated in the Second International vanished in the wake of that war.

And note: Such “reinvention” will require a strategic process over a period of years. All the analyses that place the blame for the defeat

of the left on specific tactical errors have their place, but they fade into irrelevance given the supremacy of nationalist identification. **In Israel, this nationalist identification is increasing in demographic terms from year to year, and can only be confronted by an alternative national identification.**

So who's going to do it?

That is to say – who is actually going to do the footwork? Organized sectors must join in the effort: the kibbutzim, and perhaps some of the moshavim; the graduate frameworks of the youth movements; the student cells in the universities, and particularly in certain colleges and teachers' seminaries. In my opinion, it would also be worth considering cooperation with potential allies, such as Panim, the umbrella group for Jewish Renewal in Israel, the Masorti (Conservative) movement, and the Israel Movement for Progressive Judaism (Reform).

...And what is to be done?

The following pages deal with this question. The assertion above that “the Zionist Left must reinvent itself in order to return to its original essence” mandates that this booklet will follow the spirit of “Know from where you came, where you are going, and before whom you are destined to give a future account and reckoning” (Ethics of the Fathers, 3a). We owe this “future account and reckoning” primarily to ourselves and to our children.

The appendix to this booklet presents the article “The Illusion of Israeliness”, which was published in **Yediot Hakibbutz** following the defeat of the Zionist Left in the elections in 2009. What has changed since then?

Good luck to us all.

Michael Livni
Kibbutz Lotan
Sivan 5775 / June 2015

The Elephant in the Room of the Zionist Left

“...We are now in a period of preliminary construction in the Land... We are engaged in gathering gravel and plaster and in setting up frameworks for the buildings... Since the return from the Babylonian Exile we have not known the challenge of a project of this magnitude... We do not yet have spare time for profound spiritual life... But days yet lie ahead of us. Many, many Jews will yet dwell in the Land and our cultural woes will give them no rest... (and will cause) great spiritual distress to those who come after us... hence in days to come we will grapple with questions of our cultural fate...”

Berl Katznelson, Eulogy for Chaim Nachman Bialik, July 1934, “The Outstanding One of Our People (Yachid Ha’uma)”, In the Travails of Man (*Chevlei Adam*), Am Oved 5705, p. 214–5.

The “elephant in the room”, the issue barely even considered by the Zionist Left,¹ is the question of the **Jewish-Zionist character of Jewish nationhood in the Land of Israel**. This is the question of “our cultural fate”, as Katznelson put it over 80 years ago. The affinity of the Zionist Left to the Jewish heritage is not properly manifested in words or in action. Firstly, though, we must ask what it means today to speak of Israel’s “Jewish-Zionist” character? After all, the word “Zionist” does not even appear in the usual phrase “Jewish and democratic”, for well-known political reasons.

Almost 20 years ago, during a colloquium on the subject of “The State of Israel as a Jewish and Democratic State,” Justice Aharon Barak (then President of the Supreme Court) remarked:

“In my opinion, Zionism on the one side and Halacha [Jewish religious law] on the other have both left their mark on the State of Israel... However, an objective and scientific appraisal must recognize the distinction between the two... We shall now focus ...on the traditional aspect. **I leave the Zionist aspect for another occasion**”.² (Emphasis added- M.L.)

The comments below thus constitute an attempt to delineate a conceptual and practical course within the Zionist Left for examining the question that Justice Barak left open. We must first begin by re-examining the term “Zionism”.

Political Zionism and Cultural Zionism

Beginning in the late nineteenth century, two historical processes led to the emergence of Zionism. Political Zionism had its origins in the external pressures and threats facing the Jewish people, particularly modern anti-Semitism. This led to Theodor Herzl’s initiative to establish a state for the Jews “like all the nations”. **Political Zionism had a defined and finite goal.** This goal was achieved with the establishment of the State of Israel. The political challenges facing Israel have by no means been resolved, but these challenges now face the sovereign State of Israel and its institutions. From the perspective of purely Political Zionism, we are now living in a “post-Zionist” era.

In the context of the phrase “Jewish and democratic state”, it is important to recall that it was the World Zionist Organization that brought democracy to the Jewish institutional world. Ahead of the Second Zionist Congress in 1898, Herzl introduced the “Zionist Shekel”, payment of which granted equal rights for any man or woman aged 18 and above who joined the Zionist movement. In terms of gender equality, the Zionist movement was thus almost a generation ahead of democracies such as the United States and Great Britain.

Cultural Zionism evolved by a different process. Ahad Ha’am argued that the threat was an internal one, and that Jewish civilization had reached an impasse by the end of the nineteenth century. The disintegration of traditional society and the resultant physical and cultural assimilation appeared to threaten the creative survival of the Jewish people wherever they resided. Ahad Ha’am believed that a Jewish state in the Land of Israel, drawing on the Jewish heritage, was vital in order to enable sustainable Jewish renewal.

Ahad Ha’am summarized his approach and his Zionist hope by referring to the Jewish state as the “flesh” intended to sustain the “spirit” of the people:

“If, as we hope, the future holds for Israel yet a third national existence, we may believe that the fundamental principle of individual as of national life will be neither the **sovereignty** of the flesh over the spirit, nor the **annihilation** of the flesh for the spirit’s sake, but the **uplifting** of the flesh by the spirit”.³ (Trans. Leon Simon, emphases in the original Hebrew)

In effect, Ahad Ha’am defined an **infinite goal** – to confront “our cultural fate”, to use the term coined by Katznelson thirty years later. Political Zionism sought **to save the Jews**; Cultural Zionism aimed **to save and renew Judaism**.

A.D. Gordon represented the Cultural Zionist vision within the historical Labor Zionist movement:

“We created words for the nature of our Land and said: ‘The human created in the image of God...’ Now we come to create a new saying for this nature that lives within us: a people in the image of God... This is the basis of our idea, the idea of our renaissance and redemption; this is the basis of the idea of the ‘nation-man’”.⁴

Avraham Shlonsky, the poet of the Third Aliyah, complemented the approach delineated by Ahad Ha’am and manifested his generation’s sense of Jewish-Zionist commitment:⁵

“And so we face the bookshelf of Jewish canon / At the junction
of generations between night and dawn
We dared to create from the beginning / For we came to this place
to continue the way.

Jewish-Zionist Identity and Political Messages

Political questions, both covert and overt, undeniably influence the cultural war in which Israeli society is currently embroiled. Value-based disagreements in the political realm reflect worldviews based on distinct beliefs and values: the conditions for peace in order to end the conflict with our neighbors; individual versus collective responsibility (in the socio-economic realm); the status of minorities in a Jewish state; and the role of the legal system in a Jewish and democratic state. On all these issues, the Zionist Left, and even the Center, differs on the macro level from the political and value-based culture that is currently dominant in the State of Israel.

In many cases, the points of departure for the political positions of many circles within Israeli society are rooted in their Jewish and national approach. Indeed, these circles overtly refer to their Jewish identity when explaining their political positions. **The Zionist Left is not part of this discourse.** As I have noted, the absence of the Zionist Left from the question of Jewish-Zionist identity is the "elephant in the room". By failing to address the Jewish-Zionist context in words and deeds, the Zionist Left damages its own cause twice over.

Firstly, the Zionist Left thereby abandons its historical mandate to promote innovative Jewish-Zionist culture, free of the shackles of the Orthodox rabbinate. Moreover, by ignoring the issue, the Zionist Left creates a vacuum.

On the one hand, this vacuum is filled by identities and actions of a nationalistic character in the spirit of messianic Zionism. On the other, the Zionist Left refrains from challenging the essentially non-Zionist nature of Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) Judaism. Haredi Judaism views the Zionist Left as an "empty wagon", in contrast to the "full wagon" of the rabbinical and Halachic bookcase that it represents and regarding which it serves as the arbiter. The Zionist Left fails to respond (see below).

Secondly, the rational arguments presented by the Zionist Left (particularly in the socio-economic realm) support political positions that seek to narrow gaps and support weaker sections of the population. These arguments are effective for a certain circle of educated Israelis, mainly Ashkenazim. They do not resonate with those sections of the public whose political identification and behavior stems primarily from their Jewish national identity. Universal Western ideology (Socialism and social democracy) is not the prism through which they identify themselves in political terms. The Zionist Left must

present itself as part of the tribe – **the tribe that embraces all the Jewish people**. There is no “white tribe” and “black tribe”. The Zionist Left should not abandon a universal ideological language, but it must **also** use the language that is shared by the whole people, in terms of symbols, images, and sources drawn from the Jewish heritage. It must do so in order to connect to a public that has a nationalist character. Refraining from using the language of the tribe heightens the social alienation of the Zionist Left from these circles, and thereby contributes to its political isolation.

Thus the Zionist Left must draw on the Jewish heritage. In terms of social justice and the equal value of human life, for example, it should integrate concepts from the Jewish sources – from the Torah in general, and from the sayings of the prophets, in particular. A.D. Gordon’s reference to “a people created in God’s image” is a great example of this. As for our attitude toward other nations (including our neighbors), we can develop the line of argument: Each of the “seventy nations of the world” was created in God’s image, and the destiny of each nation is to grapple with the meaning of this reality in a spirit of mutual respect and peace.

When debating with the Haredim (who declare that “their Torah is their craft”), we must draw on quotes from the sources. In the Ten Commandments we read “six days you shall labor and do all your work...” The Ethics of the Fathers stated the case even more clearly: “Ultimately, all Torah study that is not accompanied with work is destined to cease and to cause sin” (Ethics of the Fathers 2:2). In the final analysis, however, the debate with the Haredi world focused on two issues: the very legitimacy of the Zionist enterprise as such, and the principle of democracy as a derivative of the value of human equality.

These comments are of an essentially tactical-political nature. In a given situation they may influence circles at the margins. But in Israel the margins are very wide, as illustrated by the fact that many voters only decide at the last minute which ballot slip to put in the box.

In order to develop its Jewish-Zionist identity, the Zionist Left must engage in a thorough process of ideological examination and adaptation. This is the only way that will enable it to offer an alternative (free)* Jewish-Zionist message.

The Jewish-Zionist Identity of the Zionist Left: Ideological Examination and Adaptation

The Zionist Left in Israel must revitalize its ideological position concerning its Jewish-Zionist identity and formulate a plan of action based on this position. The following parameters must be addressed in this context:

- What is the Jewish-Zionist belief of the Zionist Left? This question inevitably requires discussion and formulation of a position on the religious/secular polarization that dominates discourse in contemporary Israeli society.
- What is the role of “tradition” (normative Judaism) in defining the heritage of the Jewish people as a whole and, in particular, within a Jewish and democratic state.
- What responsibility does the Zionist Left bear for action in the realm of free Judaism in order to influence and shape “our cultural fate”?

* “Free Judaism” (Yahadut Hofshit) refers to a Jewish commitment not based on Divinely-ordained Torah or on a Divine entity that relates to human deeds.

The Faith of the Zionist Left

The Zionist Left is not secular and must not define itself as such. Changes are vital both in the language of discourse and in self-perception. In the past, figures such as A.D. Gordon, Avraham Shlonsky, Berl Katznelson, and David Ben-Gurion saw themselves as “free Jews”. They were heretics, to be sure – and proudly so. A “heretic” is someone who rejects the concept of a divinely-ordained Torah and an omniscient God. Those who came to the Land of Israel in the Second and Third Aliyot were people of faith. They believed in the national task of reviving the Jewish people in its Land as a sacred task of repairing and transforming the Jewish individual and the Jewish people (ironically, this Zionist faith was also historically shared by the right-wing Revisionist movement).

The men and women of the Second and Third Aliyot were well versed in the Jewish sources, and felt a particular affinity for the prophetic books of the Bible. They had no doubts whatsoever as to their Jewish-Zionist identity and commitment. The pioneers rebelled against the version of Orthodox Judaism they saw around them. For non-Zionist (and certainly anti-Zionist) Orthodoxy, Tikkun (repair/transformation) meant observing the 613 commandments. The Haredim (the ultra-orthodox) continue to adhere to this position to this day.

Thus the Zionist Left must reject the secular/religious dichotomy on the principled level. Such a dichotomy obscures the true rifts that influence “our cultural fate”:

- The most important rift is that between Zionist believers and genuine secularists. Zionist believers believe that the Jewish state has a cultural Zionist purpose. They seek “Life of the

Hour” while remaining connected to the national revival – what A.D. Gordon referred to as “Life Eternal”. In this context, Gordon warned those who came to the Land of Israel seeking solely “Life of the Hour:”

“Exile is always exile, and there is no less exile in the Land of Israel than in any other country...”⁶

With hindsight, Gordon’s concern was all too real. In contrast to Zionist believers we see those who act solely for “Life of the Hour” – for material goods, enjoyment, and personal achievement. Worship of the material is reflected in social gaps, in the phenomenon of tycoons on the one hand and criminal families on the other. Jews who wear kippot can be found among both these groups.

In the final analysis, a secularist is someone in whose life “the Holy” focuses on securing their own good and that of their family. It is important to clarify this point: someone can be a good citizen, pay their taxes, be loyal, and serve in the reserves without the Zionist concept of “Life Eternal” ever appearing on their radar screen. In this sense, the majority of the Jewish people in Israel are secularists.

We should add: while there are undeniably secular Jews, there is no such thing as “secular Judaism”. There is no Judaism without faith. There is no Judaism that does not embody the Holy and/or the aspiration to the Holy, which is the aspiration to “Life Eternal”. In my opinion, the initiators of the various “secular midrashot” do themselves and their endeavors a disservice by using the term “secular Judaism”. What these frameworks actually promote is free Judaism (others prefer the term “humanistic Judaism”, in order to emphasize that these

approaches place the human at the center, rather than divine authority as interpreted by the rabbis).

- Among believing Jews, there is a rift between Zionist believers and those who do not believe in the Zionist destiny of the State of Israel. The latter mainly comprise Haredim, although sections of the non-Zionist extreme left also share this belief.
- A second rift among believing Jews is that between messianic Zionist belief, which believes in divine dictates (as interpreted by specific rabbis), as against Zionists who believe that the fate of Zionism, “our cultural fate”, will be determined through the democratic authority of human institutions. Currently, the messianic “Divine dictate” of Jewish hegemony in all of Judea and Samaria threatens the future of Israel as a viable Jewish-Zionist and democratic state. (A further discussion of this issue is beyond the scope of this essay.)

The above analysis of Israeli-Jewish society identifies a number of issues that demand operative conclusions:

- A starting point or opening position for the Zionist Left on the question of free Zionist Judaism.
- Guidelines for action to embark on a process of contending with the “elephant in the room”.
- The adoption of the ancient dictum: “When there is no vision, the people become unruly” (Proverbs 29:18).

Heritage, Traditional Judaism, and Free or Sovereign Judaism

Yariv Ben Aharon suggests that the history of the Jewish people can be divided into three stages: Biblical Judaism (First Temple),

Rabbinical Judaism (Second Temple and 1900 years of Exile), and the present period, which has created the possibility for sovereign national Judaism (democratic authority).⁷ Jewish heritage includes all the stages of Judaism, and the third stage includes the thought and action of the Zionist movement, as a sovereign national movement of the people.

Traditional or “normative” Judaism is the Judaism dictated by Orthodox rabbis, as holders of exclusive authority to determine the Halacha. As a movement loyal to the principle of free Judaism, the Zionist Left argues that all stages of the heritage must be respected – including the stage of rabbinical Judaism as a source, **but not as an authority**. The authority to determine “our cultural fate” rests with the people, not with the rabbis.

But there is a catch: “Free Judaism” demands familiarity with the Jewish heritage and creative action rooted in this heritage. “Free Judaism” does not mean the reduction of Judaism to ethnic origin. Free Zionist Judaism demands a commitment to the challenge of Jewish-Zionist action in the field of symbols and rituals. The free Judaism of the Zionist Left must actively examine and interpret in a pluralistic manner the symbols and rituals of the entire Jewish heritage. This work should draw on all the Zionist streams of Judaism – Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform.

In order to be faithful to the objective of Cultural Zionism, we should learn from Prof. Zeev Falk:⁸

“...What should bind us to the pluralistic direction is the recognition that we are in such a grave crisis that only through the strengths of all of us, in a kind of ideological competition where each follows their own path while trying to contribute their share to overcoming this crisis – only through the shared strengths of us all do we even have a chance of emerging from the crisis”.

The Zionist Left should embrace the principle of pluralism in Judaism, since this is consistent with a “Jewish and democratic state”. A further reason is that from a Zionist standpoint the State of Israel is the nation state of the entire Jewish people. Indeed, we have an interest in drawing world Jewry closer to Israel, rather than distancing it by granting senior status to Orthodoxy.

So... what do we need to do in order to begin to address "the elephant in the room" – the Jewish-Zionist identity of the Zionist Left?

1. Discussion groups and media – the current state of the Zionist Left demands ideological encounter, beginning on the local and regional level. Another essential component is use of the media – online and written – as a forum for clarifying and discussing questions of principle and current issues. The media are necessary both for internal and external clarification, as well as for projecting the Zionist Left to the wider public. As will become clear below, use of the media is particularly important for those engaged in formal and/or informal education.

2. Establishing a formal education system – it is important to recall that the strength of messianic Zionism and Haredi Judaism stems from the annual influx of the graduates of their distinct formal education systems. Informal education in the blue-shirted youth movements is not sufficient for this purpose.

Without a formal education system, it will not be possible to educate a generation willing to bind its life (even partially) to any vision of Tikkun for the individual, for the people and for

the world in the spirit of the Zionist Left and free Judaism. The youth movements should recruit their hard core from among the students who attend such a formal education system. This was how things worked when the youth movements absorbed students from the “Workers’ Education” stream prior to the establishment of the state.

Value-based themes will be conveyed both in an experiential and in a cognitive manner, particularly in the humanities. The cultural experience in the school must reflect free Jewish-Zionist culture through activities in preparation for Sabbath, festivals, and special days and in the lifecycle (see below).

Cognitive and value-based themes to be conveyed over the course of the years on various levels (spiral education) include:

- The belief that there is a purpose to life beyond “Life of the Hour” that justifies the investment of energy in the Tikkun (repair/transformation) of the individual, the people, and the world.
- Clusters of values stemming from the above belief, such as: the equal value of human life; social and environment justice; and community as a framework for promoting these values.
- Informal education (youth movements) must offer options (frameworks) for practical realization.

It is not within the scope of this essay to enter into tactical discussions – for example, whether this education system should integrate with selected points within an existing education system or should be founded as a new and independent system. In my opinion, the Zionist Left should be careful to promote public education and not to slide into the realm of private education.

3. Marking Sabbath, festivals, and special days in the community and as well as events in the lifecycle of the individual: This aspect is relevant mainly in the case of communities the majority of whose members identify with the Zionist Left (such as kibbutzim, including urban kibbutzim and communes established by graduates of the youth movements). In many cases, these communities already have a tradition of creativity in the spirit of free Judaism, but such activities must enjoy a much more meaningful public echo.

Lifecycle events provide fertile ground for initiative. Bat Mitzva ceremonies should be developed further, and couples should be encouraged to marry in alternative ceremonies rather than through the rabbinate. An internet search for “Bat Mitzva” or “alternative wedding” already yields dozens of suggestions from the non-Orthodox streams in Israel. The Zionist Left should publicly support alternatives to rabbinical Judaism; this is the only way that it will develop its own visible and alternative Jewish-Zionist identity.

We must not blur our messages and we must not be afraid to speak clearly. This is true when it comes to our vision and action plan in the political and security realm and in the socio-economic realm. It is equally true in the context of activities relating to the free Jewish identity and commitment of the Zionist Left, as part of its Zionist vision. Without grounded and clear statements, based both on Israel as a democratic state and on its foundation as a Jewish-Zionist state, efforts by the Zionist Left to promote free Judaism will lack credibility.

Advancing the various proposals described here requires budgets that may appear to be beyond our reach. But this is not enough. The level of Jewish-Zionist commitment required

is similar to that seen in the Labor Zionist movement three generations ago. Does the Zionist Left have the human capital that can hear and respond to this message by embarking on the mission to meet the challenge?

“Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?’ And I said, ‘Here am I. Send me!’” (Isaiah 6:8)

Appendix

The Illusion of Israeliness*

(A response to Uri Zohar, “The Fall of the Left”, **Yediot Hakibbutz**, 20 February 2009)

- Israeli – Out, Jewish – In. That’s the message of the 2009 elections.
- The real question is: what is the Jewish-Zionist identity and commitment of the Left?
- Michael Livni asks and answers.

.....

“The only Zionism that may be successful is the Zionism of the social ideal – Socialist Zionism... I see the great value, and at the same time the great responsibility, of the working class in the Land of Israel: It is the chief bearer of the responsibility for the **Jewish building** (emphasis in original – M.L.) of the Land of Israel”.

Martin Buber, “Why Must the Building of the Land of Israel be Socialist?” (1928), **Paths in Utopia** (ed. Avraham Shapira), Am Oved 1983, p.196.

I was struck by Uri Yizhar’s accurate analysis (from my perspective) regarding the “Fall of the Left”. Uri also rightly remarks that:

“Social-democratic policy is an essential condition, but not a sufficient one, for the renewal of the Left and its adoption among the popular classes”.

However, the remedy that Uri proposes – “a return to Israeliness” – is an illusion.

* This article by Michael Livni appeared, in a somewhat abbreviated form, in **Yediot Hakibbutz** on March 13, 2009, in response to an article by Uri Yizhar discussing the “Fall of the Left” in the 2009 elections.

“Israeliness” is a thing of the past and will not return

The concept of “Israeliness” describes the culture of the “generation of Isaac” before and after the establishment of the state. Or, if you prefer the literary image that has been disseminated in movie theaters around the world – Ari Ben Canaan in Exodus.

The **“generation of Abraham and Sarah”**, the founding generation of faith and action, fashioned and inculcated the values of “Israeliness” that characterized the **“generation of Isaac”**. The generation of Isaac rejected the ideological formulas and focused mainly on practical action. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to deny that its actions embodied an entire world of values. The tremendous effort and sacrifices made by the generation of Isaac (under the guidance of the founding generation) were crowned with success. But the generation of Isaac lacked the tools to pass on the values embodied in its actions to the generation of Jacob.

In the Book of Genesis, Jacob receives the name and identity of “Israel” as a result of his struggle with the angel – “and a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn...” (Genesis 32:25). As a result of the struggle, the angel grants him a new identity: “Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have strived with beings divine and human, and have prevailed” (Genesis 32:29). However, today’s (non-believing) generation of Jacob has simply abandoned the struggle to define its essential identity, confining itself to its affinity to the land. The meaning of the adoption of the identity of “an Israeli of Jewish origin” has been the abandonment of any commitment to the building of the Land of Israel within the context of the Jewish heritage.

“Israeliness” and Judaism – political ramifications

After the elections, Ha’aretz published an interview (13 February 2009) with George Birnbaum, the partner of Arthur Finkelstein who worked to support Israel Beitenu. Birnbaum discussed his campaign for Lieberman and claimed:

“In the 1996 elections, when Finkelstein worked with Netanyahu, he was the first person to identify the distinction between ‘Jewish’ and ‘Israeli’ as a defining feature of identity ... it hasn’t changed since then”.

Uri Yizhar’s “Israeliness” does not appeal to Arabs, Haredim, most of the Mizrachim, and a majority of the Religious Zionists. Many identify this “Israeliness” with a patronizing elite. “Israeli” is identified with north Tel Aviv and the kibbutz. And now, Israeli is out, and Jewish is in.

This is the message of the 2009 elections. The real question remains: what is the Jewish-Zionist identity and commitment of the Left?

What do we really need to do?

Can we reach out to popular circles, traditional circles, mainly of Mizrahi origin, many of whom kiss the mezuzah when they enter a house? This is the question and this is the challenge.

It is important to note that the challenge is not only a political one. It is an educational challenge relating to the renewal of the Jewish character of the Labor Zionist movement. Formerly, the Labor movement constituted the “popular circles” and it led the way. “Popular circles” can lead to Socialism (of various kinds), but as we all know they can also lead to Fascism.

Some seeds have already been sown. The Rabin Seminary at Oranim educates in the spirit of sovereign Judaism as distinct from rabbinical Judaism. Many of the communes established by graduates, as well as the urban kibbutzim, operate under its inspiration. A network of communities and prayer groups has been established on the initiative of Panim,* in which several kibbutzniks are active. The traditional creativity of the kibbutz movement in marking festivals and special days and in life cycle ceremonies still serves as a platform for reaching the popular circles. In my opinion, the Conservative movement and the Reform movement (which is not committed to Halachic authority) constitute allies.

First and foremost, however, we must consciously reject our definition and our image as secularists. To be secular means to have abandoned that which is holy. A secularist is devoted to life of the hour and ignores questions of Life Eternal. We must emphasize that there is more than one way to be Jewish. We must not only adopt a Jewish identity, but we must also find the commitment to imbue it with our own content, without accepting the authority of the religious establishment. We must be capable (both psychologically and in terms of knowledge) of phrasing social and political messages in language that touches the gut feelings of the popular circles. A return to “Israeliness” is a false remedy.

* The umbrella organization of groups committed to Jewish Renewal – including renewal within the framework of the Halacha.

Remarks

- 1 I have chosen to use the term “Zionist Left” as an umbrella term for that section of the Israeli population that identifies with the idea of the State of Israel as a Jewish-Zionist and democratic state, collective responsibility for the welfare of all, and a diplomatic agreement based on two states for two peoples, ensuring a Jewish majority in the Jewish state. In practical terms, this profile applies today to many who define themselves as “centrist”.
- 2 Remarks by Aharon Barak, “The State of Israel as a Jewish and Democratic State”, **Colloquium, 1 August 1997**, World Union of Jewish Studies, Jerusalem, 5759, p. 12 (in Hebrew).
- 3 Ahad Ha’am, “Flesh and Spirit” (1904), in: **Selected Essays of Ahad Ha’am**, Leon Simon, ed. Jewish Publication Society of America, 1962, p.158.
- 4 A. D. Gordon, “Toward a Thorough Clarification of Our Idea”, (1920), **Man and Nature**, Zionist Library, 1956 pp.205-6. (Hebrew)
- 5 Avraham Shlonsky, from “These Versus Those”, **Poems**, Sifriyat Poalim 1954, Vol. 1, p.306.
- 6 A.D. Gordon, “Life of the Hour that is Life Eternal and Not Sacrifice”, (1911), in: Yosef Shechter, **The Thought of A.D. Gordon**, Dvir, 1957, pp. 85-6. (Hebrew)
- 7 Yariv Ben Aharon, “Three Stages in the Path of the Jewish People”, **Roots of Sustenance**, 2nd edition, Yitzhak Rabin Mechina, 2005, pp.178-91. I am very grateful to Yariv Ben Aharon for his contribution to my thought on this subject; my interpretation of his article is entirely my responsibility.
- 8 Zeev Falk, 1924-1998, was a professor of law at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Falk was an observant Jew who founded the annual journal “Jewish Law”. Comments from a colloquium on “Religious Pluralism”, **Petachim: Quarterly of Jewish Thought**, Ellul 5741 (1981), p.20.



MICHAEL LIVNI (LANGER)

Dr. Michael Livni (Langer), veteran Zionist educator, is a member of Kibbutz Lotan in Israel's southern Arava desert. Born in Vienna, Austria in 1935, Michael Livni grew up in Vancouver, Canada, where he was active in Habonim Labor Zionist Youth. He graduated with an MD in 1959 (University of British Columbia). His doctoral thesis (social psychiatry) was: "An Adolescent Subculture – A Study of the Habonim Youth Movement in Vancouver."

Livni made Aliya to Kibbutz Gesher Haziv in the Western Galilee in 1963. He worked variously as a teacher, educational coordinator, treasurer and agriculturist. From 1975-1977, he served as the first shaliach (emissary) to the Reform movement in America.

From 1979-1983 Livni served as coordinator for the Israeli Reform Youth Movement, Tzofei Telem. From 1989-1992 he served as Director General of the World Zionist Organization's Department of Jewish Education and Culture. Since 1986, he has lived on Kibbutz Lotan, where he helped establish educational tourism and eco-tourism. He served as coordinator of ecological projects.

While on Sabbatical in India in 1999, Livni served as educational advisor to the Mitraniketan youth village in Southern Kerala.

Livni has published books as well as numerous articles, both in Hebrew and in English. He has dealt with the interface between Zionism and Reform Judaism (Reform Zionism-An Educator's Perspective), Jewish Zionist education, Eco-Zionism, and community in the modern age. He has also participated in Jewish – Christian inter-faith dialogues. He is an active member of the International Communal Studies Association and the Intentional Communities Desk of the kibbutz movement.

Michael Livni is married to Dr Brenda Herzberg. He has three sons and six grandchildren who live on his former kibbutz, Gesher Haziv.

Contact information: Dr. Michael Livni, Kibbutz Lotan, D.N. Chevel Eilat, ISRAEL 8885500

Telephone: 972 (0)54 9799055 - mmlivni@gmail.com

Website: www.michael-livni.org

ISBN 978-965-91791-2-1



9 789659 179121



www.KibbutzLotan.com