

My Judaism is Israeli, my Israeliness is Jewish

• BY MOTI ZEIRA

On Monday, October 1, 1973 – four days before the Yom Kippur war broke out – I took part in a delegation of the Ironi Gimmel High School in Haifa to a Zionist seminar in Jerusalem. I was a 17-year-old boy, dozing off, a member of and counselor in the Secular-Zionist-Socialist youth movement “*Hamahanot Haolim*.” A secular Israeli – then and now – a proud descendant of grandparents who were among the pioneers of the third aliya and parents who founded the country with their very hands.

We participated in the seminar alongside other 12th graders from a religious high school. In our first joint activity, the counselor put up a sign with the word “Israel” on one wall, and on the opposite wall a sign with the word “Jewish.” He asked us to position ourselves under one of the signs. All the religious pupils stood beneath the “Jewish” sign while we, the secular students, stood as one below the “Israeli” one.

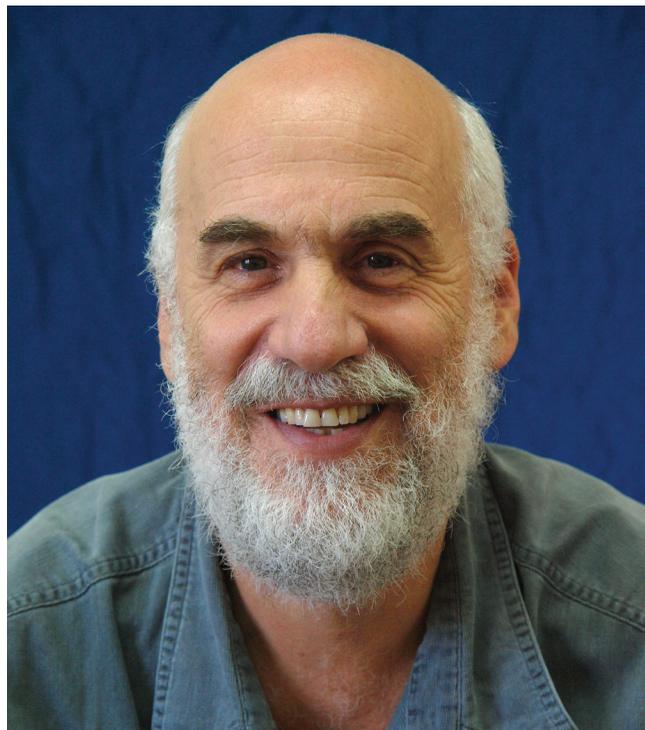
The distinction between the “Jewish” and the “Israeli” they presented us with in that distant seminar was nothing less than an educational crime! The assumption on which this activity was based – a seemingly obvious and commonly accepted assumption – is that “Israeliness” stands opposed to “Jewishness.”

According to this conception, there lies here a grand ideological and spiritual battle: Israeliness is secular, Zionist, humanistic and universal, but Judaism involves religious and ethnic elements. The righteous and determined are on one side, the clerical are on the other.

For many years, the secular Israeli public has held this awfully haughty position. What do we have to do with these religious rituals, the depleted remnants of the Diaspora Judaism that has been deleted from history? Religion is opium for the masses, an expression of human weakness and of the need to cling on to something larger than us in our meaningless world. We are the *tzabarim*, the salt of the earth, we are taking our fates into our own hands, fashioning our own future, and are building our national state with our very own strength.

“Do not listen son to fatherly morals/ and to motherly teaching pay no heed” – the pioneers’ hymn of “*Hashomer Hatzair*” asserted – “and tread a path and depart from/ the path which your father walked.”

Already for many years, the secular camp feels its power has weakened, and it has withdrawn from the “war,” having unconditionally capitulated. Underneath the self-assured secular determination, a feeling of ideological-spiritual inferiority has been exposed; a scared, ignorant position,



whose self-confidence any religious person can easily dissipate with some deceptive trick.

Such a position internalized the notion that “Judaism” belongs to the “religious.” We, the secular, according to this view, focused on building a national home, and our inferiority vis a vis the “religious” is only because we stopped believing in ourselves and our secular values, which stand in complete opposition to the “Jewish” values, namely, the religious ones.

There can be no greater mistake. The self-confidence of early secular Zionism stemmed precisely out of a sense of being naturally at home in Jewish culture. Their Zionism was a continuation of their Judaism and did not contradict it. Of course, in their fervor to realize the Zionist ethos and successfully complete the national mission they had taken on themselves – they painted the Diaspora Jewish past in the darkest colors.

In doing so they tied together the observance of the commandments, faith in God, the synagogue, studying the Torah, and various other Jewish concepts and ways of life – and categorized them all as part of that which must be repressed, in order to succeed in their generations’ mission.

The more farsighted among them realized the terrible

price of this decision: ignorance, a sense of cultural foreignness, alienation from the Jewish people, weakening the profound roots that grant the new national home its stability.

Hayim Nahman Bialik, the secular national poet, dedicated his life to building a bridge between Zionist secularism and the treasures of Jewish culture. When he passed away in 1934, Berl Katznelson, among the heads of the Labor movement in pre-state Israel, wrote: "We are now in the land of Israel in a period of initial building. We are busying ourselves solely with accumulating sand and lime and erecting the foundations of buildings. Our hearts are not yet directed to furnishing the house, to arranging the inside... We still do not have the leisure for profound spiritual life. The only thing that justifies our generation's life, that gives it purpose, that grants it actual value is the effort of building itself. Apart from that we are poor and paltry as seedlings that have not yet properly been enrooted. The dangers of a lowly cultural life await us at every corner... But further days await us still. Many, many more Jews will return to the land of Israel and our cultural travails will not give them respite. And that which was discussed in our time with disdain, whether because of hard work or because of ignorance, will turn into great inner distress to those who will follow us."

The weakness of our secular experience does not stem from the weakening of our adherence to secular values, but from an overly narrow interpretation of secularism. Being "secular" does not consist of a closed and permanent set of beliefs and customs, a religion the deniers of which seal their fates of descent and submissiveness.

I am a Jewish-Secular-Zionist, all at the same time, and the joint concept of "Jewish-Israeli culture" is, in my eyes, a great hope: the key for us seculars to take cultural responsibility, and a refusal to leave the scene to all kinds of appointees of "Judaism," whether Orthodox, secular or of any other kind.

AND SO we founded, 27 years ago, the "Midrasha at Oranim" – an educational center for the renewal of Jewish life in Israel. The purpose of the Midrasha is to contribute to the formation of a society whose members "feel at home" in their Jewish and Zionist culture and create their personal and public persona from it; a society in which there is mutual accountability, social responsibility and warm human relations.

'Being "secular" does not consist of a closed and permanent set of beliefs and customs'

In order to fulfill this vision, the Midrasha seeks to develop Jewish-Israeli communal life; achieve equality between men and women in Jewish culture and Israeli society; develop a cultural-social leadership committed to this vision; and deepen Jewish education in the education system, with a pluralistic and open approach.

The education system is the most important arena in which to deal with the cultural identity of Israeli society. The Midrasha is one of the leading institutions with regards to Jewish identity, and developed an approach specifically adapted to work on these issues with the Israeli public. The Midrasha wrote and published learning materials for the Israeli school system and it maintains for the Education Ministry the "widening of certification" program for teachers in the "Jewish and Israeli Culture" school subject. It is also a senior partner to the ministry in the steering committees and various forums dedicated to develop the subject.

The Midrasha also runs the "Makom" program – a comprehensive approach in the field of education aimed at promoting among pupils, teachers and parents a sense of "being at home" in Jewish culture and its sources. The "Makom" program – which is backed by the Education Ministry, the Posen Foundation and other foundations – encompasses the whole of the education system in the local councils, and functions through a communal approach.

The program is active in both the fields of formal education and community activities. The education program is based on a holistic approach, and is therefore active in most of the dimensions of school life: the curriculum, the circle of the year and of life, social-community work, all done in collaboration with pupils, teachers and parents. The program complements and widens the Education Ministry's curriculum on the subject and seeks to turn the school into the center for renewal of free Jewish life for the school community and its surrounding.

In addition, the program seeks to strengthen the communal foundations based on Jewish and Israeli identity. It enables groups in the community to become acquainted with and learn about Jewish renewal and promotes social-communal action. All the program's activities work toward the development of a common cultural space of Jewish renewal in local communities.

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