

The Future Society

Bambi Sheleg

Biography: Bambi Sheleg is the editor of the Israeli magazine *Eretz Acheret* and a columnist for *Ma'ariv*. She lives in Jerusalem.

Abstract: This paper traces the effects of ideological purity in contemporary Israeli society. It contends that the traditional Jewish "culture of adversity" that produced barriers between Jews and gentiles in the Diaspora, contributes today to the division between Jew and Jew and has led to the rise of narrow special interests, thereby destroying national ethos. Only through compromise, moderation and commitment to national responsibility will the problems of Israel be overcome.



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I. The National Crisis

The belief that "No one puts his life on the line for moderation" has accompanied me throughout my adult life. Since my youth, I have found myself in social milieus that valued "authenticity" above all else – in other words, political, social, and religious purity. "Seeker of compromise" was and remains a term of opprobrium – the mark of a fundamentally flawed character, of intellectual and emotional flabbiness, of an unwillingness "to see something through to its end."

The pursuit of perfection is an ancient human pursuit, as old as the pursuit of truth: it is the one and there is no other. But, as *Shelomo ha-Melekh* reminded us, truth is elusive: "I said I would be wise, yet it is far from me" (Eccl. 7:23).

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As one living in Israel, the recent years have made me painfully aware of the toll imposed on us by attempts to realize perfect "truths." The process we are witnessing demonstrates in so many different ways the unbridgeable chasm that exists between beliefs, however right and pure they may be, and reality. It seems to me that the profound distress we are now experiencing is at least in part attributable to the efforts made by each group to convince all others that its belief is the overarching one that deserves

to be realized here and now.

In the first decades of the State of Israel, everything seemed clear to us. The Zionist-Socialist ideology, which spoke as well in the name of social solidarity, covered us like an enveloping blanket. But the Six-Day War and the Yom Kippur war unsettled us, and then the bitter debate began over the future of the territories conquered by Israel and the attitude we should take toward the Palestinian populace.

First came the advocates of the Greater Land of Israel-*Eretz Yisrael ha-Shelemah*. For almost three decades, they attempted to persuade the broad Israeli community that massive settlement in the expanses of Judea and Samaria would solve all of Israel's problems. The settlers brought about widespread Israeli settlement in areas densely inhabited by Palestinians. Through their efforts, the idea of dividing the Land was transformed into a vision of Utopia. They came in the name of their absolute truth and acted upon it. On the other hand, the advocates of Peace Here and Now signed a utopian agreement with the Palestine Liberation Organization. It took a great deal of blindness to introduce armed Palestinian soldiers into areas populated by Jews and in which IDF soldiers were also stationed. Both groups – the advocates of the Greater Land of Israel and the advocates of Peace Here and Now – came with good, pure intentions, but circumstances proved more powerful than their beliefs and their absolute truths.

Meanwhile, our preoccupation with the debate over the

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Land and the continuing bitterness of that debate distracted us from our other problems. While we were arguing, our streams began to spew forth sewage, many of the local administrative authorities decayed, education fell apart, natural resources were transferred to well-connected private owners, the issue of military service became an amoral political question, and the rights of many workers were trampled. Social gaps widened, and many foreign workers among us suffer. While we were arguing, a dominating capitalism came to prevail over a segment of the Israeli economy, taking aggressive bites out of social solidarity.

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The extensive debate over the future of the Land of Israel caused Israeli society, previously united under its broad Zionist-Socialist banner, to be fragmented into conflicting elements. This was a strange development: we were transformed from a nation that was humanity's ultimate "Other" into a society in which each group saw its counterparts as the "Other.". The Zionist blanket was torn, and a void opened within it.

We constantly experience that void. Its power appears most blatantly in the numerous special privileges enjoyed by some sectors of society at the expense of the rights of the majority. These special privileges manifest themselves in the taxes imposed on middle-class and lower-class workers, with no comparable taxes on the money markets; in the painful facts that only some Israelis serve in the IDF and even fewer serve in the reserves; and in the exorbitant salaries and benefits that some senior civil servants enjoy, as if the public treasury were a private inheritance from their parents. The privileges can also be seen in the limited media visibility of those poorer communities that are not part of the social class that produces journalists; in the socially and intellectually homogeneous makeup of the Supreme Court; in the monopoly exercised by the Chief Rabbinate over family life and conversions; and in many other areas.

It goes without saying that without moral leadership, failings such as these come somehow to become taken for granted in daily life. And so one wonders: With all these failings so apparent, why is nothing done to halt the relentless progression into disaster? Is there no way to stop the ever-growing, unimpeded dominance of special interests?

Reality has its own ways of alerting us that an historical era is coming to an end. The events of the past year and one-half proclaim loudly that the time of absolute truths has ended. The time for profound compromises is upon us.

Difficult historical periods have their silver linings. They demand of us that we make a careful examination of reality's complexities, which are glossed over in easier times. Difficult times allow us to distinguish with surprising ease between the essential and the insignificant, the important and the dispensable. And one thing has become unambiguously clear to Israelis in recent months: the sectarian celebration is over. Cultural relativism will not work here, not now and not in the foreseeable future. If Israelis want to live, they need to actively create a cultural-social-moral core that is essential to the stability of a society made up of people from seventy different cultures and that is constantly battling for its existence.

II. The Lesson of History

The Sages of Israel who witnessed the destruction of the Second Temple bequeathed an important lesson to succeeding generations. They taught that the Second Temple had been destroyed because of gratuitous hatred, the failure of Jews to take account of one another as human beings. The culture of civil disagreement that *Hazal* developed during Second Temple times was destined to produce generations of scholars who glorified the Torah of Israel and granted Jews vitality and spiritual strength during their long years of exile. That culture had a goal of reinforcing Jewish national existence in the Diaspora and erected an insurmountably high barrier between Jews and the non-Jewish world, far beyond the requirements of

purely Torah law. Yet at the same time that very mechanism sometimes raised up internal walls between groups of Jews as well. In contemporary academic language, this environment is termed "an adversary culture."

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The Holocaust that came upon us in the twentieth century led to the establishment of the State of Israel only three years after the end of World War II. The ensuing waves of immigration, during which Israeli society also had to deal with numerous wars, made it clear that the Jews who had returned to Zion were not all of the same mold. The differences were not simply between left and right or between religious and secular. When I consider Israelis, a singular grouping of people, I ask myself, "What did these Jews bring back from all the places to which they had been exiled?" I answer that they came home with the sum total of human experience, for good and for ill.

Caught as it is between East and West, Israeli society needs to undergo a process quite the opposite of that undergone by rabbinic Judaism in the context of exile. It must move toward inclusiveness. If survival after the destruction of the Second Temple demanded the erection of walls, the present situation requires reversing that process. Precisely because we are totally responsible for the future of the nation, we must first lower the internal barriers, pursuing fundamental compromise between left and right, between religious and secular, and among the many streams of Judaism. We must make room for all who are now in Israel and all we hope will come in the future. The purists who propose a perfect and absolute way of life make room in Israel for relatively few people. Their ideology will always leave outsiders. And the purists seem more authentic to us than the seekers of compromise because the ideas of Second Temple Jewry, with their perfect and entrancing absoluteness, have flowed in our veins for more than two thousand years.

Today the separationist phenomenon pervades Israeli society. To preserve the ways of traditional Judaism, both Religious Zionists and *Haredim* chose to establish separate educational streams, declining to have Orthodox children educated with other Israelis. That educational segregation gave rise to residential segregation, different types of military service (such as the *yeshivot hesder*), and widespread social consequences. The isolation in which broad sectors of Israeli society lead their lives prevents them from genuinely knowing one another, allowing stereotypes to dominate. The media in continual search of a story consistently give voice to the most extreme positions in the religious and secular worlds, while the large center of Israeli society becomes ever more despondent. In effect, we are trapped by the extremists on all sides, rendered immobile. Each one of us, religious and secular alike, is intimidated by those within our own sectors who are more extreme.

No one knows how and when the difficult times now upon us will end, but there is much that we can do even now. Amid the ruins of perfect sectarian dreams grows a vision of a new society, comprising people coming from all the Israeli cultures, a community whose sense of responsibility for the future of the entire nation counts for more than its responsibility for the fate of a particular sector. It is a community that recognizes that reality consists of dream fragments rather than complete dreams, a community that has learned the power of modesty and doubt, a community ready to make room in its heart for all the Jews who have returned to Zion and who will yet return. That, in my view, is the essence of "ingathering of the exiles."

Of course, some will ask, "Where do the Arabs fit into all this?" Let us have faith in the process of inclusion, accompanied by a national sense of responsibility. If we succeed in forging a community bound to the future of the Jewish nation, if we return successfully from our journey through the province of gratuitous hatred, if we succeed in understanding those Jews whose entire existence is a challenge to what we believe to be the highest of principles—if we succeed in all this, then we certainly will attain peace with the Arabs as well.