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Israeli Culture

By Dalia Liran-Alper, Ph.D.

(September 2010)

Introduction - Culture and Israeli Culture

From an anthropological perspective, the term "culture" encompasses the way social life as a whole is conducted – the tradition and typical customs, the character of the arts, the structure of social, familial, sexual, and economic relations, and so forth. Culture includes a value system and mediates between society and the reality in which it functions. Society and culture researchers emphasize that a shared cultural foundation based on cultural assets, traditions, values, and symbols is a prerequisite for a society's existence. However, a shared foundation does not necessarily create a coherent and homogeneous cultural system, for in every society there are groups with their own unique cultural system that they seek to preserve and foster (Shavit et. al, 2000).

The term "culture" is frequently used in the context of creative texts and art. If in the past the term "culture" in Western society referred to an elitist heritage of texts that was defined as high or classical culture, then in recent times its definition has expanded in the wake of two central developments: deepening social, ideological, and practical equality, coupled with the accessibility of additional social classes to a variety of forms of creative expression. The growing diversity of the media has also contributed to a heightened sense of equality and greater accessibility. In Western society, from an ideological standpoint, there is increased recognition that not only the elites but also the general public, the "masses", and "others", have a "legitimate" culture. Consequently, it seems that the boundaries between "high culture", "popular culture", and "folk culture" are becoming increasingly blurred (Liebes & Talmon, 2004: 69).

Israeli culture has been evolving and growing for the past one hundred and twenty years. What is this culture? Is it even possible to speak of one culture? Does the culture that has been evolving in this small Middle Eastern country still belong to Jewish heritage? In response to orthodox rabbis who regard the new Israeli culture as inconsequential and vacuous, as "The Empty Wagon," a compilation of articles published following a scientific conference on one hundred and twenty years of Israeli culture that was held under the aegis of the Hebrew University was entitled "The Full Wagon." In this compilation a variety of culture and society researchers present Israeli society as a rich, living, and vibrant historical entity that reflects multiple contrasts, and a wealth of influences, that has experienced struggles, grown in the encounters between immigrants groups, and was shaped between ideology and spontaneity. Israeli literature, poetry, theatre, film, dance, Hebrew songs, and architecture, all illuminate the complexity and vitality of Israeli culture (see Bartal, 2002),[1] either as a value system or a diverse variety of forms of expression.

Origins of Israeli Culture

Israeli culture is the accepted term for the culture and art created in Israel from the late nineteenth century onward, and especially after the establishment of the State of Israel. Four foundations stood at the basis of the cultural reality that developed in Israel from the mid-nineteenth century: (1) pre-modern Jewish culture and Jewish heritage, which is represented by Yiddish and Ladino; (2) imperial culture, which the Jews adopted in the Modern Era, and which was

imported mainly from Czarist Russia (and later from Poland and Germany); (3) local Middle Eastern culture; and (4) the new Hebrew culture, whose bearers were members of the Palmach[2] (Bartal, 2002).

Zionism, the "Sabra"[3] Myth, and the Hebrew Language

Bartal (2002) contends that Zionism was a chapter of ethnic nationalism and a demand for the reshaping of national Jewish culture. It grew from awareness of the problems that emerged in the wake of the disintegration of the multinational empires in Europe and the Mediterranean Basin. The Zionists strived to eliminate the cultural archetypes the immigrants brought with them, and sought to reshape the traditional heritage in a national-secular style and adapt it to a new national discourse. Thus the revival of the Hebrew language should also be viewed as the cultural language of the nation-state and as an expression of the new identity taking shape. He adds and emphasizes that modern Jewish nationality in its Zionist form not only continued the cultural unification trends of the new nation-state, but also the trends of the modern centrist state with its unilingual and unicultural ideology that opposed the earlier multiculturalism. The pre-modern Jewish cultures, which had been diluted with influences from their host countries, came to Israel with the waves of immigrants. Here they encountered the demanding force of a national ideology that sought to unite politics and culture. The painful encounter between heritage and the national vision created tensions, imposed changes, and engendered counteractions. Various cultural traditions claimed a place for themselves in Israeli society, and became part of the Israeli mosaic, either by merging into the dominant streams, or by externalized isolation (ibid.).

In the first years of the State of Israel, what was termed "Israeli *sabra* culture" flourished (for more on this, see Almog, 1997). In later years, the veteran Zionist cultural system, in which the *sabra* constitutes the ideal Israeli (with socialist values, a worker, builder, and soldier), was replaced by two alternative cultures that vied for public opinion. The more central of the two is capitalist, liberal-democratic, and global in nature, and the second (although constituting a minority in society) is the religious, conservative-ethnocentric system.

An Immigrant Society

As the product of an immigrant society, Israeli culture combines within it a rich and diverse variety of influences and cultural endeavor drawn from the countries and cultures from which the immigrants came. During the first years of settlement in pre-state Israel, the culture in the *yishuv*[4] was mainly influenced by the milieu of the small Jewish town, the *shtetl*, from which most of the Jewish immigrants came, and by French and German cultures, which were encouraged due to the donations of Jewish benefactors such as Baron de Rothschild. In the 1930s and 40s, Russian culture had a dominant influence, which was manifested in poetry, music, and theatre. Theatre was also influenced by Yiddish culture and to a certain degree, especially the light entertainment stage, by vaudeville from the West and the innovative *kabarett* theatre that developed in Berlin. In the 1950s, French influence on Israeli cultural life was evident and, from the 1960s onward, western-American influence has increasingly grown in every sphere of culture and the arts.

After the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, waves of immigrants thronged to Israel from many different countries, but their influence on Israeli culture was gradual and only partial. The immigrants were required to assimilate into the new society, into the "melting pot" of Israeliness. Up to the end of the 1970s the influence of the cultures of immigrants from the Arab States, especially the Maghreb, on Israeli culture existed in the main through "mediators." Thus, for example, the films that portrayed the world of Mizrahi Jews ("Bourekas films") were almost always directed by non-Mizrahi directors (e.g., Menahem Golan), and the comedy trio "HaGashash HaHiver" brought expressions of Mizrahi culture, which the leaders of Israeli culture often times considered inferior, to the light entertainment stage. In some cases works gained recognition only in retrospect, e.g., popular Israeli singer Zohar Argov.

Israeli Culture and Art

Israeli culture is an effective tool for refuting the stereotypical perception of a "country under siege" and "*bitachonism*" [securityism], and giving expression to the complexity and diversity of life in Israel. The culture is multifaceted, open, and democratic, and the literature, dance, film, theatre, music, plastic arts, design, and cuisine reflect creativity, innovation, boldness, intensity, and Israeli audacity, *chutzpah*.

Poetry and Literature

The printed word and reading are central in the new Hebrew and Israeli culture. Social and technological changes pose challenges for readers, but recent studies indicate that beyond an aesthetic experience, readers in Israel claim that Hebrew literature helps them to define their national, Israeli, and Jewish identity (Adoni & Nossek, 2007). Many consider Hebrew poetry and literature to be one of the most commendable achievements of Israeli culture. Since the 1950s and 60s modern works have been presented in colloquial Hebrew, as opposed to earlier Hebrew poetry, such as that of Natan Alterman, Avraham Shlonsky, Rachel Bluwstein, and Leah Goldberg, or the literary style of one of the greatest Hebrew writers, Nobel Prize laureate Shmuel Yosef Agnon. Notable among the modern "State Generation"[5] poets are Yehuda Amichai, Natan Zach, and David Avidan, and among the authors are Moshe Shamir and Aharon Meged, who were followed by Amos Oz, A.B. Yehoshua, Meir Shalev, David Grossman, and others.

Israeli authors were influenced by writers such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez, but also by short-story writers like Raymond Carver. Over the years, the number and importance of women authors has increased (Orly Castel-Bloom, Shulamit Lapid). A particularly notable phenomenon was the appearance of immigrant stories (Ronit Matalon, Dorit Rabinyan), and dramas set against a religious backdrop (Naomi Ragen). The works of male authors writing about the "gang" and male comradeship have also developed and increased (Amir Gutfreund, Eshkol Nevo).

Music

Classical music, which is identified more than anything else with high culture, flourished in Israel for many years. The Israel Philharmonic Orchestra has performed all over Israel, and frequently beyond its borders as well, as has the Jerusalem Symphony Orchestra, the Israel Broadcasting Authority Orchestra, and other musical ensembles. Many local authorities founded small orchestras (the Ra'anana Symphonette Orchestra), many of whose musicians come from the former Soviet Union. In recent years classical music is being threatened not only by its own irrelevance, but also due to the increasing prestige of ethnic music, and symphony orchestras have begun to employ marketing strategies ("Philharmonic in Jeans") to attract audiences (Katz & Sella, 1999).

French influence was clearly evident in popular music in the 1960s, either directly (e.g., Yossi Bannai performing Georges Brassens' songs), or in performances by *Les Compagnons de la Chanson*, or indirectly (in some of Naomi Shemer's songs at the time). This influence was later replaced by a wider variety of influences, from British music (especially The Beatles), Greek music (Aris San, Mikis Theodorakis), to the continued influence of modern Russian culture. From the mid-1980s onward most of the influence was drawn from the United States, Britain, Europe, and South America, while the popularity of Turkish, Greek, and Arabic music also increased. The dominant genre is pop-rock, while the popular "Songs of the Land of Israel" and alternative music are still widespread. A musical style unique to Israel was exemplified by the Israeli army entertainment troupes, which were highly popular from the 1960s to the 1980s. The growing diversity and wealth of popular music performances and activities is associated with it being a prominent characteristic of youth culture that has been gaining strength in Israel in recent years (Katz et al., 2000).

Theatre

The first theatre in Israel was the Habima, which was founded in Russia in 1917, immigrated to Israel, and established theatre that was heavily influenced by Russian culture. The Habima National Theatre, the Cameri Theatre of Tel Aviv, the Beit Lessin Theatre, the Gesher Theatre (which performs in Hebrew and Russian), the Haifa Municipal Theatre, and the Beersheba Municipal Theatre are considered the major theatres in Israel. Their repertoire includes a variety of classical and modern drama, as well as original Israeli drama.

In the 1950s the main influences on theatre in Israel were drawn from the cultures of England, France, and the United States. Other influences began filtering through in the 1960s, and even more so in the 70s, especially that of European Brechtian theatre.

Today, theatres enjoy greater public support than any other cultural institution in Israel, repertory and commercial theatres alike, and they are also expanding their subscription systems for the purpose of financial stability (Katz et al.,

2000). There is extensive theatrical endeavor taking place in Israel, with a wide variety of influences, and a special place for renewed Russian influence following extensive immigration from Russia. The renewed legitimacy of Yiddish culture also bore a degree of influence, which led to the staging of popular dramas in the style of Yiddish theatre.

Dance

Israel is considered a powerhouse of modern dance (despite meager public financial support), with dance companies such as the Batsheva Dance Company and the Bat-Dor Dance Company, that perform all over the world. In the sphere of classical ballet, the contribution of immigrants from Russia and the former Soviet Union is notable. A branch of dance unique to Israel is Israeli folk dancing, which is a leisure activity for many Israelis, but which can also be viewed as the genre connecting folk dance and artistic dance, e.g., the annual Karmiel Dance Festival which has been held since 1988 (and representative Israeli folk dance troupes that perform all over the world).

Film

Israeli film developed slowly from the 1950s and 60s, and initially focused mainly on social issues, tales of heroism (*He Walked Through the Fields*), and immigration stories, the most notable of which was Ephraim Kishon's *Sallah Shabati*, which was also an Oscar nominee. Stories about ethnic communities and immigration also featured in the popular genre of ethnic melodrama (e.g., *Nurit*). Since the 1970s and 80s, with the increasingly growing influence of Western culture, more Israeli films focused on interpersonal and romantic relationships, and youth films became increasingly popular (*Eskimo Limon*, *Dizengoff 99*). Cinematic endeavor in Israel has expanded considerably in recent decades, despite scant funding and meager public financial support (Katz et al., 2000). Growth is evident in two directions: on the one hand films continue to focus on the individual, usually an urban man, and his inner struggles and hardships (*Wisdom of the Pretzel*, *The Bubble*) and, on the other, films that focus on the individual but against a backdrop of current events and the unique social structure in Israel, which present a critical perspective and have gained great critical acclaim worldwide, e.g., *Waltz With Bashir*, *The Band's Visit*, and *Ajami*.

Plastic Arts

Israeli painters and sculptors present and sell their works all over the world. There are large art museums in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, and small museums have been established in many towns and kibbutzim. The Israel Museum in Jerusalem houses the Dead Sea Scrolls as well as an extensive collection of Jewish ceremonial art and folk art. Safed, Jaffa, and Ein Hod are home to artists' colonies. French influence was prominent in the sphere of painting and plastic arts in the 1950s and 60s, but later the influence of other creative European streams increased, and American influence in the sphere of design is particularly evident.

Press and Television

Israelis are avid newspaper readers. In the early years of the State, political party newspapers flourished, and subsequently declined in the wake of sociopolitical changes in the country. The big dailies nowadays are privately owned commercial newspapers. Many foreign-language newspapers have closed down as a result of dwindling waves of immigration to Israel (with the exception of newspapers in Russian). Many cities and towns publish local newspapers and culture magazines, and the publication of free daily newspapers has become increasingly widespread. In recent decades a lively and open public and political discourse is being conducted in the press on social issues and around the relevance of historical Israeli myths (Almog, 2004).

Israeli television was only launched in 1968, twenty years after the establishment of the state, as part of the Public Broadcasting Authority (which until then comprised only radio broadcasting and which was founded with the establishment of the state). Up to the 1990s there was only one television channel (in addition to a channel in Arabic and an educational television channel). The major change in the Israeli media map occurred following the inauguration of a public-commercial television channel, Channel 2, and the commencement of the cable company's activities (Caspi & Limor, 1998). This development led to a significant increase, in terms of both quantity and quality, in television drama and endeavor in Israel. Initially dominated by dramas, comedies, and series imported from England and especially from

the United States, alongside numerous news and current affairs programs, and studio discussion and debate programs, Israeli television began developing local programs and series that were integrated into prime viewing times on the main channels, as well as the niche cable and satellite television channels.

Notable among original Israeli programs and shows are imported formats such as *A Star is Born* (based on the British *Pop Idol* and *American Idol* model), *Big Brother*, and *Survivor*, as well as exported original formats such as *In Treatment*. The media map nowadays is rich, diverse, and vibrant, while, as in other countries, it is also waging a difficult struggle for survival between the longstanding and online media.

Analysis of the cultural endeavor, especially in theatre and film and, to a great extent in music and literary content as well, shows that from the 1980s onward most of the protagonists deal with personal and interpersonal problems. Subjects associated with Israel's existential problems as a society feature in no more than 20% of works, a phenomenon indicating a tendency to focus on the personal-private world and shunt these issues to the periphery of society's field of vision (Katz et al., 2000: 203). Social issues are generally presented through the individual citizen's encounters with the social system, and "fears and anxieties" and "personal traumas" are frequently addressed. The content worlds of film and theatre have changed considerably since the 1960s, when problems associated with and referring to the Jewish-Arab conflict were more widespread, as were oppositional perspectives that were reflected in cultural texts, whether in theatre (Hanoch Levin) or film (Uri Zohar).[6] In general, the picture of Israel's cultural world reflects the ideological changes that have taken place in Israeli society. It has become a more individualistic consumer society, and there has been a decline in the collectivist orientation that typified the early years of the Zionist state. As in any consumer and capitalist society, some of the values of the working class have been adopted by and absorbed into the bourgeois culture and ideology in a process that Gramsci (1971) termed "cultural hegemony," whereby the working-class culture loses its political identity and becomes an ostensibly organic part of the bourgeois culture, for example Mizrahi music which in the early twenty-first century enjoys pride of place at family celebrations in all the ethnic communities.

Central Characteristics of Israeli Culture in the Twenty-first Century

- **Localization and Globalization:** Israel's population is relatively small, which encourages cultural importation from other countries to meet the varied cultural needs of a population that hails from diverse cultural backgrounds. Additionally, the cultural climate in Israel today is not only the product of local prevailing winds, but also of changes to the global climate (Almog, 2003: 23).

- **From "Melting Pot" to Pluralism, Alternativism, and Multiculturalism:** Signs of divergence from the monolithic Zionist line began appearing in the belles lettres literature written in Israel and filtered through to overlapping arts such as theatre and film, with the press highlighting nonconformist works in its coverage. Israeli society in the twenty-first century is a "sectoral society"; in other words, it is a rift-ridden Jewish society comprising numerous sectors: the secular sector and the various sectors of immigrant groups, the religious-nationalist sector, the Ashkenazi and Sephardi Jewish ultra-Orthodox sectors, and an Arab nationalist minority. There is interplay between culture and society, and therefore between subcultures and subgroups within a society as well. The cultural reality in Israel is typified by tensions and dilemmas, first and foremost the tension between the desire to create and maintain a shared culture versus the desire to allow and enable multiple voices to be heard.

  The interplay between culture and society exists between the subcultures and subgroups within a society as well. The cultural reality in Israel is typified by tensions and dilemmas, first and foremost the tension between the desire to create and maintain a shared culture versus the desire to allow and enable multiple voices to be heard.

- **Between Tel Aviv and the "Periphery" Outlying Areas:** The issue of the relationship between the center of Israel and its outlying, peripheral areas preoccupies culture policy makers in Israel from two aspects: creating equal access and encouraging local creative activity.

  A large proportion of secular cultural endeavor takes place in Tel Aviv and its environs, although many national cultural institutions are located in Jerusalem, and up to the 1990s that is where the vast majority of Israeli cultural

endeavor took place. The last two decades have seen increasing music and theatre activity in the outlying areas, either authentically or by means of institutional direction, at Sapir College for example, which was established in the Northern Negev (and includes a school of communications and a department of cinema and television arts).

Conclusion

Israeli culture is a heterogeneous, dynamic, and vital entity that is not easy to define. It could be argued that Israeli culture is so rich and diverse due to the diversity of its population comprising immigrants from five continents and more than a hundred countries, and due to significant subcultures such as the Palestinian, Russian, and Jewish ultra-Orthodox cultures, each of which numbers about a million people who maintain independent communities, including their own newspapers and networks for the dissemination of culture products.

It should also be noted that in the twenty-first century the principles of the culture system in Israel still largely follow the principles of "high culture," whereas the leisure activity patterns of culture consumers lean more toward what is termed "popular culture" (Katz & Sella, 1999).

In a position paper Shavit et al. (2000) authored, and which was intended to formulate Israeli culture policy in the twenty-first century, they recommend that the culture policy should allow a correct balance between the following three points, on the assumption that every person can feel at home in world culture, preserve and foster his culture of origin, and identify with and act in Israeli culture:

1. Fostering the connection with the historical heritage of the Jewish people, the Hebrew language, and the assets and values created by Hebrew and Israeli culture in recent generations.
2. Fostering the cultures of the various sectors in society – Jews, Arabs, and others…
3. Fostering the openness of Israeli culture to world culture, without impairing the uniqueness of original endeavor.

They go on to state that the culture policy should accord special weight to Hebrew culture in all its diversity and strata, for it is Hebrew culture that determines Israeli society's overall cultural tone and its common cultural foundation (ibid: 9).

They also propose that the culture policy be founded on a broad concept that enables the dynamics of the cultural endeavor and the changes taking place in it to be expressed. In addition to the arts that are traditionally addressed, namely theatre, film, belletristic literature, dance, music, museums, and to a certain degree "ethnic" culture as well, the culture policy should address a long series of artistic spheres in high culture and popular culture, such as light and popular music.

In their estimation, in contrast with the "melting pot" policies of the 1950s, today Israel can afford to accord legitimacy to cultural plurality and diversity, while ensuring the existence of meeting points and dialogue between the different sectors, and acknowledging the existence of a common Israeli cultural core in Hebrew in which a central place is accorded to the heritage of the past. In other words, Israel's culture policy should strive toward plurality and partnership that provides a common cultural message and a space shared by all, alongside unique spaces for the different traditions and cultures in society (ibid: 7). Despite the popularity of demands for multiculturalism, Katz and Sella (1999) warn that the threat inherent in cultural segmentation into sectors should not be ignored when an explosion of multiculturalism is liable to undermine the dream of reviving the momentum toward the rebirth of a Jewish/Israeli culture.

Notes:

[1] Minister of Education Yigal Allon quoted national poet Chaim Nachman Bialik: Any nation seeking existence without shame and disgrace must create culture, not only to be used, but to create it with its own hands, with its own tools and materials, and with its own mark (quoted in Ronen, see Katz & Selah, 1999: 9).

[2] The Palmach (Hebrew acronym for *Plugot Machatz*, lit. "strike force") was the elite fighting force of the Haganah, the underground army of the Yishuv during the period of the British Mandate for Palestine.

[3] The word *sabra* is derived from the Hebrew name for the prickly pear cactus, and is used to describe a native-born Israeli.

[4]   The Jewish settlement in pre-state Israel.

[5] People who were born in Israel in or around 1948, with the establishment of the State of Israel.

[6] It should be stated, however, that in the first decade of the twenty-first century Israeli film has reverted to engaging in political and social issues, as stated above.

Table of Contents