

## The Persistent Significance of Jewish Ethnicity in Israel

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Israel is widely known as a successful immigrant society. Two fifths of its population consists of Jews originating from Moslem countries. Despite their disadvantages (arrival after 1948, traditionalism and lack of resources), they are considered highly assimilated as shown in the acquisition of Israeli culture, social mobility and mixed marriages. According to this dominant assimilationist view, Jewish ethnicity has become symbolic rather than real. The critical perspective challenges this pro-establishment approach and posits that despite assimilation, ethnicity persists as a significant divide among Israeli Jews. The persistent Jewish ethnicity is reflected in the ethnic clash of collective memories, viable ethnic subcultures, ethnic separation, ethnic politics, ethnic disparities in socioeconomic achievements and differential treatment.

The three great historical developments — the mass-immigration from the former Soviet Union, transition to peace and advancing globalization — that are reshaping Israeli society tend to strengthen Jewish ethnicity rather than to blur it. These grand forces are going to hurt Mizrahim and to keep them apart from and unequal to Ashkenazim. Three melting pots, not one, fuse Israeli Jews into three groups of Israelis (Mizrahim, Ashkenazim and the ethnically detached).

It is concluded that Jewish ethnicity in Israel is and will remain real rather than apparent for the foreseeable future. The chances for Israel shifting to a multicultural democracy are slim because such transformation requires appreciable changes and concessions on the part of major groups. However, greater openness for ethnic multiculturalism is underway as a result of the democratization of society, erosion of Ashkenazi dominance and the flourishing of ethnic subcultures.

**Keywords:** ethnic relations, Israel, Jewish ethnicity, Sephardic Jews, assimilation, multiculturalism

### INTRODUCTION

Israel belongs to a large category of societies built by European settlers and immigrants during the modern era. In this respect it is essentially similar to immigrant countries such as the United States, Canada, Mexico, Brazil, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand, and markedly different from non-immigrant countries like the United Kingdom, France, Germany, India, China and Japan. Immigration and

internal migration due to economic and social dislocations have, however, become universal and are prevalent even among traditionally non-immigrant societies. What is the long-term impact of large-scale movements of population — heterogeneity and conflict or rather amalgamation and tranquility?

The fate of immigrants depends on many factors. Their chances to adjust, to reach equality and to integrate are better when the newcomers come in small and unthreatening numbers, scatter all over the country, arrive voluntarily and can leave at will, possess good skills and resources, resemble the resident population in language, culture and appearance, and enjoy the assistance and goodwill of relatives, acquaintances, oldtimers and the government.<sup>1</sup>

For a long time successful immigrant absorption has been associated with assimilation. The newcomers are expected to discard their cultural heritage and ties with their country of origin and to completely assimilate into their new society. It is assumed that both immigrants and established residents share the goal of mutual assimilation and that societal cohesion is based on cultural homogeneity. Disillusionment with assimilation has, nevertheless, become evident since the late 1960s. It was found that assimilation is far from complete and immigrants form new ethnic groups instead of melting into the society at large. The ethos of assimilation has gradually been replaced by the new ideology of multiculturalism, according to which societies can function well with and even benefit from cultural diversity.

The United States is the best-known case and leading model of immigrant society. It was formed by the WASPs (White Anglo-Saxon Protestants) who established themselves during the first two centuries of settlement as a charter group and fully absorbed newcomers from northern and western Europe. The mass-immigration of non-WASPs from Ireland and eastern and southern Europe arriving in the nineteenth century and later disrupted the pattern of full assimilation ("Anglo conformity") and changed it to "cultural pluralism." The Irish, Italians, Polish, Jews and other European immigrants became "white ethnics," a middle group distinguished from the founding and dominant group. The lower stratum in American society is composed of descendants of Hispanics, Natives and Africans.

The controversy over assimilation versus multiculturalism can be aired by the American experience. Despite its huge territory and population, the United States has a distinct culture consisting of the English language, the British legal tradition, the American way of life, civic nationalism, liberal democracy and other patterns. Almost all population groups currently share this WASP culture. The fusion of the population is enormous registering high intermarriage rates averaging 15% among African-Americans, 35% among Natives and Mexican-Americans and over 50% among white ethnics. Gans (1979) argues that the ethnicity of the white ethnics has become symbolic rather than real. Symbolic ethnicity is expressed in symbols like folklore and self-identity but not in vital choices like where to live, which occupation

<sup>1</sup> For a review of factors facilitating the assimilation of immigrants, see Marger 1994:125-129.

to choose, whom to befriend and whom to marry. When ethnicity becomes symbolic it is diminished considerably but its soft forms may persist for generations. On the other hand, the ethnicity of African-Americans is real, still determining their life-situations. They challenge American society to recognize their different heritage and to have it represented in the national culture.

The persistence of symbolic ethnicity of the white ethnics and of the real ethnicity of the African-Americans makes a case for multiculturalism. The extent to which the United States is a multicultural or assimilating society is ambiguous and contentious on both the empirical and normative level.

Multiculturalism has become a rallying cry of minorities to obtain equality while keeping their separate culture and identity. Its precise meaning varies from one society to another (Joppke 1996). It presents a special challenge to Western liberal democracies that are based on the principle of individual rights and freedoms, deny collective rights, privatize ethnicity and encourage assimilation (Kymlicka 1995). It challenges the United States to face its heritage of white superiority and racism and to provide full racial equality and collective rights to African-Americans. It challenges the United Kingdom to face its heritage as an ex-Empire and to treat equally its former subjects who moved to the British Isle. It challenges Germany to redefine its ethnic nation in civic terms and to extend citizenship and full membership to its non-German denizens (guest workers and asylum seekers). These challenges have in common the need to reconcile collective rights with individual liberalism, to move away from the model of a single culture to cultural pluralism, to recast the nation and national identity in a way that would include minorities, and to achieve solidarity and unity amid persistent ethnic diversity and separation.

The question of assimilation versus multiculturalism in Israel varies with the type of internal division. As a whole Israel is a tri-cultural society without multiculturalist ethos. In addition to the majority's predominantly secular Jewish culture, there is an Arab minority culture and an ultra-orthodox minority culture. The state aspires to cultural homogeneity but reluctantly recognizes the right of these non-assimilating minorities to separate existence and equips them with the necessary institutional arrangements to preserve their genuine cultures. Israel is an officially Jewish state in its language, majority, institutions, goals, symbols and policies. The Arab minority (about one million, 16% of the total population of 6.3 million citizens in 2001) enjoy civil rights but it is excluded from the national core. The Arab citizens deny the legitimacy of Israel as a Jewish-Zionist state and wish to turn it into a binational state. Arab culture is well protected but not respected by the Jewish majority and is kept off limits of the national culture. Multiculturalism is rejected by the ultra-orthodox minority (about 7% of the total population). It does not content with cultural autonomy and self-preservation and attempts to impose its Halakhic culture on the entire Jewish society.

While these tensions divide three permanent and distinct cultures, the division between Jews hailing from different countries hinges on issues of assimilation and

multiculturalism. The cleavage between Ashkenazim (mostly East-European Jews, 55% of the Jewish population) and Mizrahim (Jews originating from the Middle East, 45%) is widely seen as transitional, superficial and to a large extent even illegitimate. The doctrine of assimilation applies strongly to this division between Jewish immigrants. It is in this respect that the divide between Mizrahim and Ashkenazim in Israel is similar to the divide between the WASPs and the white ethnics in the United States. The main questions are the following: Is in fact Jewish ethnicity in Israel diminishing into symbolic ethnicity like the white ethnicity in the United States? Can it really be preserved in the name of multiculturalism, and if so, in what form?

### 1. THE ASSIMILATIONIST MODEL

The dominant theme in the public thinking and social science approach to Jewish ethnicity in Israel is assimilation (Ben-Rafael 1982; Eisenstadt 1985). It is presumed that Israel as an immigrant society has successfully absorbed Jews from over one hundred countries thanks to the prevalence of several favorable conditions. These circumstances include the pre-existing Jewish identity and solidarity, the Zionist ideology of creating a single Jewish nation and state, assimilationist state policies, the great flow of capital from abroad that enables allocation of large sums for immigrant absorption without hurting the oldtimers, and the unifying factor of an external common enemy. Some elaboration on these factors is in order.

Israel essentially differs from other new states in the West and developing world that lack pre-existing nationhood. European settlers who did not share a common peoplehood, culture and identity formed states such as the United States. They had to create these commonalities anew on the basis of living together for two or more centuries. In many developing countries like Nigeria, the artificial state boundaries put together ethnic groups that have little in common and the state has to forge a common nation from scratch. On the other hand, Israel greatly benefits from pre-existing common Jewish nationhood. Although the Jews live in the Diaspora as minorities that appreciably differ in their daily language, culture and appearance, they believe in sharing a common ethnic descent (being descendants of the biblical Jacob), a common membership in one Jewish people, a common single religion (Judaism), a common ancient language (Hebrew), a common history and a common homeland (Eretz Israel). These essential components of a modern nation predated Zionism. They provide strong common bonds of brotherhood and interdependence of fate between the dispersed Jewish communities all over the world in general and between Mizrahim and Ashkenazim in Israel in particular.

Zionism as an ideology and movement accepted the idea and historical reality that Jews constitute one people and aimed to turn them into a modern nation-state in Eretz Israel. Central to Zionism is the tenet of the ingathering and amalgamation of exiles. All the Jews are urged to return to their homeland and to merge into one nation shading off their Diaspora heritage and ethnic division. Jewish settlers and new-

comers are not considered as immigrants but rather as "returnees," namely, people who were "temporarily" and forcibly absent from their homeland and returning to it without losing any right and devotion. Zionism aspires to fashion in the ancestral homeland a new Jewish society, a modern Jewish nation, a modern Jewish culture, a modern Hebrew language, and a new modern Jew (without a minority mentality, economically productive, assertive, fighting, patriotic and generally devoid of the Galuth ills). Classical Zionism is strongly assimilationist and uniculturalist in its orientation toward Jewish ethnicity in Israel. It delegitimizes ethnic differences and seeks to base national unity on uniformity.

In view of the preexisting nature of the Jewish people and the nation-building project of Zionism, it is no wonder that assimilationist policies and practices have predominated the Yishuv (the modern Jewish community in Palestine before 1948) and Israel. The Law of Return grants every Jew the right to free immigration to the country and to automatic, full and equal citizenship. New arrivals are accorded a package of aids designed to facilitate their absorption. As a Jewish state Israel grants Jews a favored status and a series of entitlements denied to Arabs. The state encourages the ethnic mixing of the Jewish population. Special programs, such as compensatory education and urban renewal, are launched to help Jews from deprived areas to achieve social mobility and full integration. Mixed marriage among Jews is considered as a fully legitimate and even desirable option. Jews from Moslem countries are not provided with any means, such as separate schools and separate communities, to preserve their heritage and to foster a distinct identity. Separate ethnic institutions are usually frowned upon as divisive. Only folkloristic patterns are tolerated as items for preservation by ethnic groups.

During most of the years of its existence, Israel has enjoyed considerable foreign aid and high rates of economic growth. Israel's new frontiers after 1967 have also contributed to the steady enlargement of the opportunity structure. The structural discrimination against Arab citizens has diverted some resources for investment in the Jewish sector. The expansion of Israeli resources by external sources has enabled the government to invest in immigrant absorption, to extend welfare services, to raise the standard of living and to furnish opportunities for social mobility for the Jews without depriving the oldtimers. The oldtimers have not suffered and have not had to make sacrifices in order to absorb the newcomers. This is a non-competitive situation (a non-zero sum game) that vastly contributes to harmonious relations between current and previous waves of immigrants.

Finally, the incessant Israeli-Arab conflict creates strong solidarity between all Jews in Israel. The resident Jewish population is dependent on continued immigration in order to fulfill the causes of Zionism, to reinforce Israel's viability and deterrence potential, to reduce the per capita security burden and to fight the fateful wars.

Although the assimilation of the non-European immigration in the 1950s presented special difficulties due to its large size and lack of modernism, it is argued that the ethnic problem has been moderated considerably over the first fifty years of

statehood.<sup>2</sup> This is shown in the emergence of a common Israeli culture, the universal use of Hebrew, the high rate of mixed marriages, the widespread social mobility, the coming of Mizrahim to power and the virtual lack of ethnic conflict. (personal discrimination, separate identity, ideological dispute, unrest and violence). The ethnic problem has persisted, however, in certain pockets that are hard to tackle (mostly poor and working class Moroccan Jews in the development towns and urban centers).<sup>3</sup>

Jewish ethnicity has become more symbolic than real as is the case with European ethnicity in the United States. It will endure for generations to come but in progressively milder forms. Israel has actually moved over the years from the ideology and policy of complete fusion of exiles to cultural pluralism. Mizrahim and later immigrants, like Russian and Ethiopian newcomers, are no longer expected to fully dispose of their cultural heritage and are allowed instead to keep their particularity while integrating into the wider society. According to this neo-assimilationist approach, Israel has become increasingly multicultural and tolerant of ethnic differences. Cultural pluralism has grown to a counterproductive degree, encouraging sectorial interests and harming national unity.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. THE CRITICAL MODEL

The predominant assimilationist perspective on Israeli Jewish ethnicity is challenged by critical social scientists (Smooha 1978, 1986; Swirski 1989) and social critics (Meir 1998).<sup>5</sup> They attribute special significance to certain factors that tend to sustain ethnicity. These factors include the strong tendency of established groups to keep their dominance, the reproduction of ethnic disparities through class inequalities and the contribution of the core-periphery split to the perpetuation of the ethnic division. The main thesis of these critical analysts is that Jewish ethnicity is potent and persistent and not just symbolic. These critical ideas need some clarification.

The point of departure of the critical model is the simple fact that European Jews had already established themselves as a founding core group by the time of the mass immigration of Jews from Moslem states to Israel during the 1950s. Zionism originated in Europe at the end of the nineteenth century in response to the "Jewish

<sup>2</sup> Assimilationist historians and social scientists depict the 1950s in uncritical terms, subtly blaming the Mizrahi immigrants for their predicament. See Fisher 1991; Hacoheh 1994, 1998; Ofer 1996; Lissak 1999).

<sup>3</sup> For a quantitative study, based on official statistics, and showing integrative and assimilative processes, see Schmelz, DellaPergola and Avner 1991.

<sup>4</sup> Moshe Lissak, a leading Israeli sociologist, maintains that Israeli society has fractured by diverse sectors like Russian immigrants, the ultra-Orthodox and Arabs, who seek self-interest and autonomy. Ethnicity naturally thrives in such society. For his critical view of the separatist tendencies among the new Russian immigrants, see Lissak 1995; Lissak and Leshem 2001.

<sup>5</sup> For a background survey of Sephardic communities in Israel and the Diaspora, see Elazar 1989.

question" there. Jewish life was precarious and unsettling. In the authoritarian, backward and nationalist Eastern Europe, the Jews did not enjoy civil rights and suffered from exclusion, while in the progressive central and Western Europe Jews continued to suffer from gross discrimination despite emancipation, social mobility and assimilation. Zionism emerged, therefore, as one solution to Jewish predicament, copying the rise of ethno-nationalist movements in Europe at the time. European Jews immigrated to Palestine and formed the new Yishuv and then the State of Israel. Since no similar crisis in Jewish life under Islam did take place until the 1940s, Jews from the Middle East constituted only 12% of the immigrants before 1948.<sup>6</sup> When they came en masse in the 1950s, they found Ashkenazim well entrenched in the core institutions of society.

While preexisting Jewish identity made the immigration of Mizrahim to Israel possible and provided a common feeling of brotherhood and peoplehood, it did not and could not counteract the well-established Ashkenazi dominance. Three factors combined to streamline the Mizrahi newcomers to the lower echelons of society: Mizrahim's weaknesses, the state's dire needs and institutional discrimination.

Mizrahim came without capital and adequate education, their families were very large and they had few relatives and acquaintances among the oldtimers to draw on. As a result of the Jewish-Arab confrontation, Mizrahim became de facto refugees, forcibly driven out of their countries of origin, had no other place to go but Israel and after arrival could not leave the country.

Israel in the 1950s had the urgent needs to immediately settle the lands occupied during the 1948 war beyond those allocated by the United Nations, to strengthen the army, to expand the economy, to widen the middle class and to increase the state administration and welfare services. To meet these exigencies, a large population amenable to mobilization and to manipulation was in need.

The targeting of the Mizrahi immigrants for meeting the state's urgent needs was not only due to their inherent vulnerability but also and mostly due to the preconceptions of the Ashkenazi establishment. In the eyes of the state and the Ashkenazi charter group, the Jews from Arab countries were backward and latecomers who should modernize, improve greatly and prove themselves before aspiring to influence and privilege. In the eyes of the Labor establishment and veteran Ashkenazim, Mizrahi immigrants embodied the mirror picture of what they are and what the new society should be: Mizrahim represented the most despised Arab backwardness (Peterburg 1995) and Galuth mentality (Diaspora heritage) (Raz-Krakotzkin 1994). They were perceived as the opposite of the new Jew and Israeli (the "Tzabar"). Ashkenazim feared that the primitive Mizrahi mass-immigration might undermine the new, secular, modern culture and the young and fragile Israeli democracy.<sup>7</sup> This

<sup>6</sup> Since non-Ashkenazi Jews constituted only 8% of the Jewish people before WWII, their rate of immigration was higher than that of Ashkenazim even before 1948. But the fact that they were a minority in the Yishuv was fateful for subsequent developments.

paternalistic view drove the government to forestall these dangers by controlling the immigrants and benefiting from them at the same time. The assailable Mizrahi immigrants were enlisted to relieve the immediate state problems. They were culturally despised and repressed, discriminated against in the allocation of services and resources (employment, power positions and settlement in the urban centers) and exploited as a channel for the collective social mobility of both the Ashkenazi oldtimers and newcomers (Bernstein 1989).

This combination of forces formed ethnic stratification during the 1950s. Ashkenazim moved *en masse* to the middle class and higher while the majority of Mizrahim found themselves in the working class and lower (Bernstein and Swirski 1982). The critical model posits that once a system of ethnic stratification was established, it is predisposed to self-reproduction by the normal mechanisms of class self-reproduction in capitalist societies. Ethnic class perpetuation can, however, be moderated or even eliminated by government intervention or large-scale societal changes in favor of the lower rungs of society.

The core-periphery split also facilitates ethno-class reproduction. A disproportional part of Mizrahim were dispatched by the government in the 1950s and 1960s to development towns and agricultural settlements in the periphery of the country and many had no choice but staying there. Since the standards of development and services in the periphery were and still are much lower than in the urban centers, the chances of the deprived Mizrahim in the periphery to enter the middle class are slim. Hence the core-periphery divide indirectly consolidates ethnic inequality.

Rather than being symbolic and transient, critical scholars claim, the division between Ashkenazim and Mizrahim is real and pervasive. Neither government intervention nor structural transformation have been underway to phase it out.

### 3. AREAS OF PERSISTENT ETHNICITY

The indications for the persistent significance of Jewish ethnicity are various and numerous. The following are the most important manifestations of ethnicity among Jews in Israel in the 1990s.

#### 3-1. Collective Memory

There is a sharp contrast in the collective memory of the two ethnic groups, especially of the 1950s as a formative decade. In the collective memory of most

<sup>7</sup> For numerous quotations of Ashkenazi leaders and press reports depicting Mizrahim in very negative terms, see Smooha 1978; Segev 1985; Meir 1998; and Tzur 1997. A study of the Mizrahi image in history textbooks for junior high schools during the 1948-67 period reveals the attribution of the following traits to Mizrahim: "apathy, impotence, primitiveness, stagnancy and backwardness. Mizrahim were portrayed as poor, dirty, physically degenerated, sickness-stricken, inferior and devoid of love of work" (Firer 1985:38).



Mizrahim, including the second and third generation, these were years of deep distress, degeneration in the transit camps and development towns, destruction of tradition and religion, cultural repression, degradation, blatant ethnic discrimination, condescending establishment, profound disillusionment, alienation and marginality. The sense of injustice and trauma can account for the rejection that most Mizrahim feel toward the left, the ruling establishment at the time, and for their support of the right.

The collective memory of most Ashkenazim and their descendants is totally different. As far as they are concerned, during the 1950s the newcomers and oldtimers suffered from deprivation; the oldtimers consented to mass-immigration although it far exceeded the absorbing capability of the new and poor state; the Mizrahi immigrants came without education and assets; an attempt was made to replace their backward culture with the modern Israeli culture; the ruling establishment acted in good faith; the errors that were occasionally committed were unavoidable; Mizrahim should feel grateful for what was done for them; and the grand project of the mass immigration and absorption was overall a great success. This Ashkenazi narrative is inherently quasi-colonialist and Orientalist (Peterburg 1995), dating back to the beginning of the century (Shafir 1990).<sup>8</sup> It does not have any room for Mizrahi grievances, there is nobody to blame and there is no injustice to remedy. In the Ashkenazi historical consciousness, Mizrahi feelings of deprivation are recognized but not justified. Irrationality is attributed to the Mizrahim for acting according to unjustified sense of inequity and vengeance.

The Labor Party under the leadership of Barak (1997-2000) felt politically obliged to correct its historical image among Mizrahim. Barak argued that bitter memory blocks Mizrahim from voting for the party in spite of its policies in favor of the lower strata and ethnic integration. Only admission of wrongdoing in the past and request of forgiveness by the party, Barak maintained, can overcome the mental block Mizrahim feel about the party. Barak managed to persuade the Labor Party to officially ask Mizrahim for pardon for its wrongdoing in the 1950s, mostly for not respecting the Mizrahi immigrants and for not recognizing their contribution to the country (*Haaretz*, September 29, 1997). This step should be understood against the foil of forgiveness and reconciliation pursued in the West (including South Africa and Japan) by charter groups. It was also prompted by Labor dependence on gaining further votes from Mizrahim in order to win the national elections.

Whatever its causes, the pardon initiative is quite significant. It is doubtful, however, that Ashkenazim in general, including Ashkenazi supporters of Labor in particular, have changed their mind and feel remorse. Barak's request of pardon was

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<sup>8</sup> The wholesale negative stereotyping of Mizrahim during the 1950s is a common knowledge that even mainstream sociologists, like Lissak (1987), are ready to concede. However, they do not trace it to the quasi colonialist and Orientalist thinking that critical scholars attribute to Ashkenazim as Europeans.

rejected by a large number of top politicians and intellectuals in the Labor Party and the Left. To name just a few, Shimon Peres, a former Prime Minister, and Yitzhak Navon, a former President of the state, and Teddy Koleg, a former Mayor of Jerusalem, opposed the move. It is argued that no wrongdoing was committed, immigrant absorption was a great success and Mizrahim were not the only group that suffered at the time.<sup>9</sup> Anita Shapira, a mainstream historian, identified with the Labor Party and Director of the Yitzhak Rabin Center for Israel Studies at the time, also took exception to the resolution. She declared: "I can understand Japanese apologizing to the Koreans. I cannot understand for what is to apologize to Mizrahim" (interview in *Haaretz Weekly Supplement*, October 10, 1997).

### 3-2. Cultural Hegemony

Inspired by Zionism to create a new Jewish culture and a new Jew, the Ashkenazi charter group formed before 1948 a new indigenous culture that later became the Israeli culture. It is a national culture, shared by all except the ultra-orthodox and Arab minorities who hold distinct cultures of their own. Underpinning Israeli culture is Hebrew as a modern language for daily thinking and functioning and for accessing a rich Jewish heritage. The modern Israeli culture favors change, espouses the Protestant ethics, and values education and exposure to mass media. Its values also include informal interpersonal relations, bad manners, aggressiveness, disrespect of privacy, and the view of law as a bending and negotiable norm. Israeli culture is familistic, nationalistic and materialistic. Although formed by Ashkenazim, this culture is a new product that does not resemble Ashkenazi or Mizrahi cultures of the Diaspora. Neither is it Western despite its Western orientation and pretension to be Western.

Israeli culture is hegemonic. As an ethos multiculturalism in Israel is limited to the ultra-orthodox Jews and Arabs, and even for them it is deficient because their minority cultures are despised and not considered as integral and equal parts of the national culture. The original cultures of the immigrants in general, and the Judeo-

<sup>9</sup> Peres decided not to confront Barak on the question of pardon in order not to "undermine the effort to return to power." Instead of apologizing, he declared: "Mistakes were made, yes! But my heart is full of true pride of the pioneering, Zionist enterprise, that does not have any parallel in this century." Navon said that by asking for pardon, Barak gave "retroactive confirmation to a set of false charges and smears against the Labor Party. The undertaking of immigration was a wonderful chapter, though painful, in the history of Zionism. When 250,000 come in four years, of course there are big difficulties and suffering. It is possible to express sorrow for the suffering and to identify with the pain, but not to ask for forgiveness. Pardon means that we are regretting, while the Labor Party of all generations has nothing to regret." Kolek labeled the charge that the Labor Party hurt Mizrahim as "unjustifiable invention... There is nobody from whom I should ask pardon. I personally did my utmost for immigrant absorption" (*Haaretz*, September 29, 1997). Even the Iraqi born writer Amir, whose novels focus on the absorption of Mizrahim in Israel, opposed Barak's gesture. He speaks of "the myth of deprivation," universality of immigration hardships and Israel's great success (Amir 1998).

Arab cultures of Mizrahim in particular, were repressed and shattered, not just adapted to Israeli life. These uprooted cultures had little chance of surviving in the new modern Israeli environment, the harsh policies of cultural repression and the severance of ties with their life source (the degraded, failing and demonized Arab world).

Some cultural openness developed in the 1970s, however, when it became evident that the Israeli culture is strong and the fears of Levantization were over-exaggerated. Cultural expressions compatible with the core Israeli culture were permitted and even encouraged. A component known "Mizrahi Heritage" was added to the school curriculum. It included folkloristic elements and chapters in the history and literature of Mizrahim. Viable ethnic subcultures, held by Anglo-Saxons, Russians, Moroccans, Yemenites, Iraqis, Ethiopians and others, have flourished. Such optional, minor ethnic subcultures enrich and refresh, rather than weaken and displace, the core culture. They are found in all Western settler-immigrant societies and liberal democracies.

Three features characterize the Israeli cultural scene in the late 1990s. First, Ashkenazim enjoy cultural hegemony because the culture they formed is dominant and they do not need to make any cultural adaptation. Second, ultra-orthodox Jews and Arabs maintain separate cultures but are denied tolerance and acceptance. And third, immigrant groups cling to ethnic subcultures in addition to the acquisition of the Israeli core culture. Mizrahim still suffer from cultural stigma and their subcultures are still held in low regard corresponding to their proletarian and lower class positions. This ambiguity is well evident, for instance, in music. Mizrahi musicians who manage to adapt their work to the "high Western standards" are accepted nationally, while common Mizrahi music is considered to be low in quality and is not allowed to compete freely despite its popularity among Mizrahim (Regev 1997).<sup>10</sup>

### 3-3. Social Separation

Contrary to the Zionist ideal of free mixing of Jews irrespective of ethnic origin, most Israeli Jews still live with members of their own ethnic group as friends, next door neighbors, classmates and marriage partners. Most striking is the separation in residential quarters. Most Mizrahim live in development towns, in Moshavim that were established after 1948 and in working class and poor neighborhoods in the urban centers, whereas Ashkenazim are concentrated in the big cities, in middle class and well-off neighborhoods, in Moshavim that were established before 1948 and in Kibbutzim. Ashkenazim also predominate in the small middle class communities that have mushroomed in the Galilee and across the Green Line in the 1980s and 1990s.

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<sup>10</sup> Yehoshua (1998, who justifies the request of the Labor Party for pardon, sees the policy to take away the Mizrahi music as the harshest step in the effort to eradicate the Galuth and Mizrahi culture from the Mizrahi immigrants. This is because music is the intimate code through which an individual is connected to his culture. It was better to conduct a dialog than to repress Mizrahi culture.

As a result of the increasing stability of the population in these areas, ethnic communities have crystallized.

Residential isolation brings about separation in education. It is very high in kindergartens and primary schools. The policy of ethnic integration formally applies to 7-9th graders only and it actually includes only half of them. Tracking in high schools and the under-representation of Mizrahim in the universities further contribute to educational separation.

Religion is the only area in which ethnic separation is institutionalized. Israeli law provides for two chief Rabbis and two local Rabbis in localities in which each ethnic group constitutes at least one third of the population. Synagogues, the cornerstones of religious life in Judaism, are highly ethnic. Ethnic separation is largest among the ultra-orthodox and substantial among the national religious.

The rate of mixed marriages is significant but not sufficiently high for blurring ethnic boundaries. On the one hand, about one-quarter of the newly wed each year are ethnically mixed and the bulk of them comes from the middle class. These intermarriages increase the interethnic contacts, tolerance and equality not only for the couples involved but also for a larger circle of relatives and friends. On the other hand, the rate of marriages within the same ethnic group (i.e., among Ashkenazim from different countries of origin and among Mizrahim from different countries of origin) is over 50%. It makes for the internal homogeneity of the two ethnic groups and for the sharpening of the boundaries between them. Contrary to preconceptions, education has not replaced ethnicity as the prime factor in the selection of marriage partners (Shavit and Stier 1997).

### 3-4. Politics

Israeli politics since the early 1980s is polarized into two political camps. The Right wing camp is headed by the Likud Party and includes the religious parties and the Radical Right. It officially stands for Greater Israel, negotiates toughly before making territorial concessions in exchange for peace, protects more Jewish interest than universal rights and treats religion favorably. On the other hand, the Left camp is led by the Labor Party and contains the Zionist left (Meretz) and the Arab parties. Its prime movers are the partition of Eretz Israel in order to keep Israel Jewish, the defense of general values and the restriction of the role of religion in public life. There is, nevertheless, no difference between the two camps in social issues since both support liberalization, privatization, globalization, a predominantly market economy and a welfare state.

This division into two political camps is ethnically marked and reinforced. Most Ashkenazim support the Labor camp whereas most Mizrahim back the Likud camp. Mizrahim prefer the Likud because of their deep resentment toward Labor for past injustices, anti-Arab sentiment, attachment to traditional religion, competition in the labor market with Arabs (Lewin-Epstein 1989), and vital gains derived from being Jews in a Jewish state. For these reasons the shift in voting of Mizrahim is by and

large within the camp rather than toward the Labor camp.

Mizrahim enjoy near equal representation in Israeli politics. Nearly half of the Jewish Members of the Knesset and government ministers in 2001 were of Mizrahi origin. The State's President, the head of the Labor Party, the head of the Histadrut (Federation of Labor), the Minister of Defense, the Finance Minister and the Chief of Staff of the army were Mizrahi as well. The ultra-orthodox party Shas, a splinter party from Agudat Israel, serves as a Sephardic party. It gets its main support from Mizrahi traditionalists, not necessarily orthodox or ultra-orthodox. It aims to bring Mizrahim back to religion and defends both ultra-orthodox objectives and the interests of the lower strata. Its strategy is to build a new Sephardic sector as the Ashkenazi Aguda has done (Willis 1995; Peled 2001).

Despite Mizrahim's impressive political representation and the powerful Shas Party (with its 17 seats in the 1999 Knesset), they do not equally share power. Ashkenazim control the two major political camps. They set the political agenda as the peace process rather than pressing internal issues. They decide that the economy should be privatized and restructured in order to compete in the world market. They determine Israel's orientation toward the West rather than integration into the region. All the social movements that have come with a new political message and gathered political clout, of which Peace Now and Gush Emunim are the most important, are Ashkenazi movements. Since most Mizrahi politicians are and see themselves as representatives of their parties rather than their ethnic groups, they do not try to articulate and serve Mizrahi interests and outlooks.

### 3-5. Class

Israel is a middle class society but the gaps between the higher and lower classes are substantial and growing. For instance, the income differential between the lowest and highest paid employee in industry and banking is enormous. However, destitution can hardly be found in Israel because of the provision of universal services and transfer payments to the poor. Thanks to the expansion of the economy and society in Israel's first fifty years, Israelis irrespective of social class and ethnic origin have enjoyed rising educational and living standards and high rates of social mobility (Smooha 1993).

Inequality in the distribution of resources is the most important component in ethnic relations in Israel. Its disappearance is a national goal and its continuity is a source of feelings of deprivation and severe tensions. Educational inequality is considered as the key for the ethnic problem. While inequality in school attendance through the end of high school is small and declining, Mizrahim receive education of much lower quality (Swirski 1995). Their high school education is more vocational than academic, leading less to matriculation diplomas (Shavit 1990; Dar and Resh 1990; Swirski 1990). The real bottleneck is higher education where for every Mizrahi student there are two to three Ashkenazim. The ratio of ethnic inequality among persons with a university degree in the general population is even greater — 1 to 3-4.

The ethnic disparities in education are associated with similar inequalities in employment, income and standard of living. To illustrate, Ashkenazim are over-represented as much as four times among persons employed in the professions and scientific occupations. The overwhelming majority of the Jewish and non-immigrant poor are Mizrahi. Family capital accumulation is much greater among Ashkenazim because they have higher incomes, live in better off neighborhoods and inherit much more per capita (Lewin-Epstein, Elmelech and Semyonov 1997).

As a result the class structure of Israeli society is ethnically distinct. The marginal, unemployed stratum of those living on welfare, criminals, the disabled, and non-working and non-studying youths are nearly all Mizrahi. The stratum of production and service workers, who earn low wages and many of them border on poverty, are predominantly Mizrahi. The middle class is ethnically mixed with a disadvantage to Mizrahim. Ashkenazim enjoy a marked lead in the upper-middle class of professionals, managers and the petit-bourgeois. The elite in all areas of life, with the exception of politics, is by and large Ashkenazi.

Two serious manifestations accompany this ethnic stratification. The substantial representation of Mizrahim in politics has not brought about similar penetration into the elite of the economy, bureaucracy, law, professions, management, science, universities, mass media, the intellectuals and social movements. The strong tendency of recruiting people to the elite from among relatives, acquaintances and persons already in another elite position blocks the mobility of Mizrahi high achievers (Etzioni-Halevy 1993). The meager representation in non-political elites restricts the Mizrahim's effective power and perpetuates widespread doubts concerning their competence.

Even graver is the fact that the ethnic socioeconomic discrepancies persist in spite of the cultural convergence (Benski 1994). They are passed on to the local born generation which shares Israeli culture. The ethnic gap in earnings, education and occupational standards is as high or even higher among the Israeli born as among the foreign born (Nahon 1987; Eisenstadt, Lissak and Nahon 1993; Cohen and Haberfeld 1998). This persistence of ethnic stratification is due not only to normal processes of class reproduction but also to the exceptional accomplishments of the Ashkenazi Israeli born who enjoy socialization for achievement and success, a high investment in formal and informal education, a positive self-image, a milieu of small family and a transfer of substantial assets from the older generation of founders and oldtimers.

The overlap between class and ethnicity renders ethnicity real. Ethnicity appreciably determines, through social class, the life chances and lifestyles of Israeli Jews.

### **3-6. Conflict**

Ethnic conflict in Israel is not intensive. The blatant manifestations of ideological rejection of the regime, biological racism, legal discrimination, violent disturbances and severe alienation, which are common in deeply divided societies, are absent in Jewish ethnicity in Israel. There is, however, a wide range of relatively

moderate expressions of ethnic tensions that testify to the significant repercussions of the ethnic division.

Along with a national consensus on basic issues — the hegemony of Zionism, Israel as a Jewish and democratic state, the narrative of the Arab-Jewish conflict, orientation toward the West, Israeli culture, and assimilation as the means to resolve the ethnic problem — significant disagreements prevail. Mizrahim are more predisposed than Ashkenazim to give more weight to religion and to national interest in individual and public life, to support affirmative action for achieving ethnic equality and integration, to favor an increase in Mizrahi influence on the national culture and to accuse Ashkenazim, the state and the Labor Party for their predicament. These ethnic discords are reinforced by the overlap between ethnicity and politics. To be sure, Mizrahim demand greater cultural and political influence and greater integration, not multiculturalism and separation.

The dominant Israeli culture has an attitude of superiority and contempt toward the Orient, viewing Mizrahim as inflicted with the backwardness of the underdeveloped world. Many of the Israeli leaders have expressed such views and warned against Levantization. Although such pronouncements have become less frequent and more subtle over the years, an ethnocentric element continues to characterize the thinking of the elite, the Hebrew literature, the mass media (Shohat 1987) and the general public. The Mizrahi Jew is perceived as less Israeli and unfavorably. Ashkenazim and Mizrahim regard the Mizrahi as less intelligent, more primitive, more vocal, more irrational and more extreme than the Ashkenazi, but also warmer and more sociable. This stereotype is also common among educated Ashkenazim, the Israeli born and teachers (Stahl 1991), and since it is internalized by the Mizrahim themselves, it generates among them a basic feeling of incompetence and low self-esteem. Besides Ashkenazim feel more reserved about having a Mizrahi friend, next-door neighbor and marriage partner. These ethnic stereotyping and rejection are intertwined with class deprivation. The image of Mizrahim cannot be positive as long as they predominate the working and lower classes, are identified with the poor and criminal and are quite under-represented in the non-political elites.

Ethnic discrimination largely takes institutional forms and is only partly personal and intentional. As such it is latent, effective and acceptable. Social institutions, such as the economy and education, are set up in a way that favors Ashkenazim in fulfilling self-potential and in competing for resources. This widespread, "normal" and institutional kind of discrimination is reflected in keeping lower the minimal wage and the wages of production workers, in offering mostly dead-end jobs to residents of development towns, in designing the educational system to fit the life experiences of the Ashkenazi middle class and in centralizing political power. These practices hurt more Mizrahim for being concentrated in the lower classes and in the periphery. At the same time Israel lacks steps of affirmative action, common in North America, in favor of deprived groups. The programs of compensatory education fail much short of counterbalancing the definite advantages accrued to Ashkenazi children. Urban

renewal and subsidized mortgages hardly equalize the tremendous ethnic gap in housing whose cost in Israel is one of the highest in the world. In the absence of a crash program to bring Mizrahim to a par with Ashkenazim, normal processes of ethnic and class reproduction predominate.

In view of the persistence of inequalities and lack of equal opportunity, the low level of ethnic protest is striking. Ethnic violence and unrest is lacking. Ethnic protest is sidetracked by voting for the Likud bloc and Shas and by hate of the Left and Arabs. It is softened by continuing improvement in living standards and by sustained belief in social mobility. Cooptation of political leaders and ongoing assimilation steadily diminish the protest potential. Yet sporadic eruptions of ethnic protest deeply irritate public opinion and serve as a reminder that there is at a deeper level a dormant dump of intense feelings of deprivation, bitterness, envy and hatred among wide strata of Mizrahim. These genuine, pent-up emotions do not surface in the daily consciousness and behavior but erupt occasionally.

To illustrate the sporadic surge of ethnicity, a brief mention of several occurrences in the late 1990s would suffice. A militant protest group, headed by Rabbi Meshulam, demanded the appointment of a state inquiry commission to investigate allegations that during the early 1950s hundreds of babies of Yemenite immigrants were kidnapped for adoption by "better qualified," childless Ashkenazim in Israel and abroad. The protest turned highly violent. The leader of Shas, Dar'i, was tried for personal corruption. He and his supporters accused the police, the justice department and the Supreme Court, of ethnic discrimination and inability to tolerate a successful Sephardic party and a rising Moroccan leader. David Levi, the leader of Gesher, accused Netanyahu, before breaking away with Likud, of treating him and his supporters as a bunch of criminals and primitive monkeys. Immediately after taking office in mid 1998, Yitzhak Levi, the new Minister of Education and Culture, initiated a policy of giving higher priority to Mizrahi culture by increasing the funding to Mizrahi arts, music, dance, theatre, and the like. The Ashkenazi cultural elite reacted with shock, dismay and harsh opposition for fear of losing vested privilege. Two candidates ran for the post of state president in 1998 — the incumbent Weitzman and Amor, a Moroccan Knesset Member who played the ethnic card ("I will be the first President from Second Israel") with the blessing of the Likud bloc.<sup>11</sup> The ethnic overtones coloring the contest were disturbing to many. The Minister of Defense, Mordechai, born in Kurdistan, decided to choose Mufaz, of Iranian origin, as the army's Chief of Staff. He was accused of personal revenge and ethnic favoritism against Vilnai, the Ashkenazi contender and the favorite of the establishment.

Most telling was the Or Affair. Knesset Member Or is an ex-general, a top Labor leader and a person with integrity. In a press interview drawing a lesson from the Labor Party's appeal to Mizrahim for forgiveness, Or expressed disappointment. "I

<sup>11</sup> Minister Sharon set the slogan for Amor's campaign: "First President from Second Israel." (*Yediot Aharonot*, February 11, 1998).



feel sad because the request of pardon has not helped. It must be clear: I am accusing Mizrahim, not Barak." He blamed Mizrahi political leaders, his fellows in the party in particular, of over-sensitivity, honor complex ("Defense Minister, Yitzhak Mordechai, is the champion of [honor] complexes") and insusceptibility for rational discussion. They feel deprived, get insulted quickly, shy away from self-criticism, misinterpret any criticism as an ethnic attack and manipulate their ethnicity for political gains. "The problem is that I cannot talk to them as I talk to others who are *more Israeli in their character*." Or continued: "When I say Mizrahim, I mean Moroccans in particular. This is the largest and most problematic ethnic group. I feel sad because these strata *lack curiosity* to know what is surrounding them and why is it so. When I appear before them, I see their lack of interest in listening, understanding and recognizing life in order to know what is right and wrong. This troubles me because it hurts not only them but also the entire Israeli society" (Ben-Simon 1998).

Or's pronouncements stirred a public storm. He was accused of racism, the Labor Party decided to deprive him of any representative role and some of his fellow Knesset Members demanded his resignation from the Knesset and party. Of highest concern was the potential electoral damage to the party. Or made vague apology and declined to resign from the Knesset. He explained that he has the good intention of raising the neglected ethnic problem and extracting it from politics. He insisted on having wide popular support and initiated a series of meetings with Moroccan Jews, who are Labor supporters and residents of development towns. He succeeded in engaging in "a genuine dialog on the ethnic issue" and was well received.

The Or Affair confirmed that statements, which are seen as racist or quasi-racist, are not politically correct in Israel of the 1990s, that Mizrahim have accumulated enough power to retaliate against such statements, that subtle and covert racism and paternalism still lurk in the mind of many Ashkenazim, and that the ethnic problem has remained an open wound in Israeli society despite all efforts to deny its existence and to deny it legitimacy. A Moroccan journalist and entertainer wrote in reaction to Or's interview: "From Golda's 'they [the Black Panthers in 1971] are not nice' to Or's 'they [the Moroccans] lack curiosity,' this country was founded by such people. Their racism is most difficult to eradicate because it is, as it were, buried under tons of goodwill. It is hardest to fight their racism because it extends a helping hand and smiles. But do not be wrong, in Israel of 1998, this is the most problematic and degrading racism" (Levi 1998).<sup>12</sup>

#### 4. IMPLICATIONS OF HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENTS

Three great historical developments are reshaping Israeli society in the 1990s and to years to come. These are mass-immigration from the former Soviet Union, advancing globalization and transition to peace. What are the implications of these grand forces for the ethnic division? It is expected that they are going to strengthen Jewish ethnicity rather than to blur it.

Continuing immigration will hurt Mizrahim. Since Israel is a society of Jewish immigration and since over 85% of Diaspora Jewry is Ashkenazi, it is inevitable that immigration will reduce the weight of Mizrahim in the total Israeli population and deflect attention from the Mizrahi question. In fact, the advent of close to one million Russian speaking immigrants to Israel in the years 1989-2001 has already transformed the Mizrahi status from a numerical majority to a numerical minority. The Russian immigrants have undermined Mizrahim's majority even in their traditional strongholds — development towns and working class communities. They decided the Knesset elections by voting for the Labor bloc in 1992, switching to the Likud bloc in 1996 and supporting Labor again in 1999. They established two political parties of their own in 1996-99 and won nine Knesset seats and two government ministries.

The impact of the Russian mass-immigration on Mizrahim is expected to be even greater in the socioeconomic sphere than in politics. New Russian immigrants have definite advantages to most Mizrahi oldtimers who are concentrated in the working and lower classes. They come to Israel with higher education and technological skills, have extremely small families, espouse strong achievement drive and high aspirations, feel culturally superior to the Israeli population and help each other. In view of these assets, the Russian immigrants successfully compete with Mizrahim in the labor market and for social mobility into the middle class. It is estimated that they will enter the middle class *en masse* after a transition period of adjustment.

Advancing globalization has similar adverse effects for Jewish ethnicity. From its inception Israeli society has been open to the influence of global forces. Immediately after the proclamation of the state, Israel shifted from subsistence to market economy, joined the West in science and technology, allied itself with the West in the Cold War, and adopted strong Western orientation in law, criminal justice, culture, mass media, leisure and sports. Globalization took off in the 1980s. The Israeli economy approached the world capitalist core through an increase in competition, in the share of multinationals, in privatization, in the collapse of the Histadrut industrial complex, in the gradual disappearance of labor-intensive jobs and in the phenomenal growth of high technology industries (communications, electronics, software, medical equipment, missiles and other cutting-edge branches). Israel got networked to the world media through a new telephone system, cable television and the Internet. Israelis broke records in the volume of tourism to other countries.

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<sup>12</sup> The censure of Or's statement was far from unanimous. Many said that it was inappropriate and pointless to speak this way, but did not condemn the statement as racist. The social advocate and historian Gorny, for instance, expressed the view of many in this regard. He wrote that the concept "racism" should be kept to denote extreme cases like apartheid in South Africa, white supremacy in the Deep South and Nazism. According to Gorny, Or expressed only prejudice that characterized many groups in the history of the Jewish settlement before and after 1948. Since the treatment of Mizrahim in the 1950s fell into the same pattern, Barak's apology was neither necessary nor justified (Gorny 1998).

The impacts of growing globalization are diverse and divisive. Globalization increases Western influences on Israel, making it more materialistic, consumerist, individualistic, secular and pragmatic. It decreases social solidarity and exacerbates class inequality. Globalization fits the outlooks and serves the interests of the higher strata. It corresponds to and reinforces their more cosmopolitan views. It multiplies the opportunities to people with know-how, initiative and connections. On the other hand, the lower strata are hard hit by globalization. Their jobs and wages are threatened and depressed by automation and cheap labor, and their life conditions are hurt by the erosion of the welfare state as a result of diminishing solidarity.

The implications of globalization for the ethnic scene are evident. Ashkenazim, who tend to be more secular and better-off, are bound to benefit from it, while Mizrahim, for being more traditional and worse-off, are liable to get hurt. Globalization widens ethnic inequalities.

Paradoxically the peace process operates like globalization (Smootha 1998). Israel was born and lived in a hostile environment during the entire twentieth century. It built a formidable war machine, highly mobilized the Jewish population and fostered a sense of threat and a sort of militaristic ethos in order to survive. It will continue to maintain a strong army because the region will remain unstable and unfriendly. Authoritarian regimes, class polarization, population explosion, Islamic fundamentalism, border disputes, competition for regional hegemony, terrorism, and threat of long-range missiles will continue to haunt the Middle East long after the decline of the Israeli-Arab conflict. Relations with other states in the region will continue to be overburdened with tensions, envy and disagreements. Furthermore, the settlement of the Palestinian question will leave many issues unsettled and considerable grudge in both sides.

While the Middle East is not developing like western and central Europe after 1945, the Israeli-Arab conflict may subside in the foreseeable future despite the eruption of the second Intifada in the late September 2000. The Oslo accords provide for mutual recognition between the Jewish and Palestinian peoples, the settlement of their disagreements through negotiation and the acceptance of territorial partition as the chief means for conflict-resolution. The peace process is backed by the super-powers and by the public opinion of both Israelis and Palestinians. While the peace talks in Camp David in July 2000 collapsed, many understandings were reached in the subsequent Taba negotiations. The widespread violence and despair among both sides in the course of 2001 left little hope for transition to peace. Yet the political discourse continued to hinge on peace, the militaristic ethos is eroding and the willingness to make greater concessions for peace settlement is increasing among Israelis.

The transition to the non-belligerent era will have adverse effects for the ethnic cleavage. By expediting the pace of globalization, it will widen class disparities, inflict unemployment, hurt the lower strata and encroach on traditional values, thereby indirectly hurting Mizrahim. With the withering away of the common enemy,

social solidarity will weaken and the willingness of the higher strata to support welfare services and redistribution will decline. Mizrahim are hardly made up for these adversities. Peace dividends are not likely to do them any good because the defense budget must remain big. The settlement of the Palestinian question will not compensate Mizrahim for the property losses in Arab countries. If Arabic speakers are needed to fulfill intermediary positions between Israel and the Arab world, it is more appropriate to recruit bilingual and bicultural Arab citizens than Mizrahim whose Judeo-Arabic culture is phasing out.

### 5. TRIPLE MELTING POTS

An intensive process of cultural and social assimilation has reduced the dimensions of Jewish ethnicity. But instead of a single ethnic melting pot, fusing all exiles into one unified nation, three melting pots have been in operation in Israeli society. They abolished the Galuth ethnicity and created a new Israeli ethnicity, dividing the Jewish population into Israelis of Ashkenazi origin (nicknamed "Ashkenazim"), Israelis of Mizrahi origin (nicknamed "Mizrahim") and Israelis of mixed origin. The differences among these three kinds of Israelis were fashioned by the inter-ethnic encounter and life situations in Israel during the first fifty years of statehood, and only partly by the Diaspora heritage.

The group of Israelis of Ashkenazi descent was formed as a result of the amalgamation of Jews originating from Russia, Poland, Rumania, Hungary, Czechoslovakia and other countries in Europe and America. The differences dividing them were made indistinct in the face of the striking discrepancies between them and the Mizrahi immigrants. Their common East-European background, their fast modernization in Palestine and Israel and their mass mobility into the higher classes from the working class eased the assimilation of the Ashkenazi oldtimers and newcomers to the extent that marriage among them has become a standard devoid of a meaning of intermarriage. Ashkenazim share the common fate and status as a dominant group and most of them are aligned politically with the Labor bloc and the left.

Less advanced is the process of assimilation among Israelis of Mizrahi descent. For them country of origin still carries a significant impact on their identity, social relations and cultural heritage. They are also divided by social class, scattering along the entire socioeconomic scale and experiencing a wide gap between the two fifths in the middle and upper strata and the three fifths in the working and lower strata. The better off Mizrahim also enjoy opportunities for integration and assimilation into Ashkenazim. Despite these internal differences, Mizrahim share a common ill-feeling about Ashkenazi hegemony, attribution of blame to Labor for the ethnic gap and support of the Likud bloc as a political means for improving their lot.

Israelis of mixed origin, who are descendants of mixed marriages, lack clear ethnic membership and tend to see themselves as all-out Israelis. To this category belongs also a third or later generation of Israeli-born who tend to ignore any ethnic

attachment. All these ethnically mixed Israelis are close in culture and class to Ashkenazim and strongly predisposed to assimilate into them.

According to the Zionist vision of fusion of exiles, it should be expected that the melting pot of Israelis of mixed origin and of Israelis indifferent to ethnicity would be the most dynamic and inclusive while the other two melting pots would not be in existence at all. But this is not the case. This genuine Israeli group is actually the smallest and least distinctive (in a representative opinion survey conducted in 1995 only 11% of Israeli Jews defined themselves as of ethnically mixed origin). In contrast, most Israelis of Mizrahi origin are crystallizing as a distinct group and developing an identity of their own, although not intentionally isolating themselves and not aspiring for ethnic separation. On the other hand, Israelis of Ashkenazi origin achieved full ethnic assimilation, but as a dominant group they do not see themselves as a separate ethnic group with an Ashkenazi identity.

The triple melting pot in the ethnic sphere is in line with the growing division of Israeli society into corporate sectors. The Russian immigrants are differentiating themselves from the wider society as a separate lingual, cultural and social sector, with their own neighborhoods, mass media, voluntary associations and political parties. The Ashkenazi ultra-orthodox maintain autonomous communities and institutions. The national-religious Jews also have their institutions and neighborhoods, and the settlers from among them even live in separate settlements. The Sephardic party Shas is building a separate sector for working class, traditional Mizrahim. The Kibbutzim constitute an autonomous sector. The Arab minority has separate localities and institutions and demands institutional autonomy.

## CONCLUSIONS

The ethnic division among the Jewish people emerged during two millenniums of exile. Despite the commonalities of descent, religion, peoplehood, ancient language, pre-exilic history and experience of a persecuted minority, Jews in Christian areas and Jews in Moslem lands differed appreciably in language, culture and level of development, and felt estranged to each other. These divergences predated their encounter in Palestine and then in Israel, but were considered irrelevant, counterproductive and illegitimate in Israeli society. The ideal was a melting pot corresponding to the official ideology of Zionism that viewed all Jews as one people and sought to bring them back to their ancient homeland, to forge them into a modern nation, to build a Jewish state and to create a new Jew.

The dominant approach in the social sciences and public opinion in Israel is assimilationist. It presumes that the attitude of mutual acceptance, the free circulation of people, the uniform public education, the shared experience in the army, the welfare state and political democracy will eventually blur and abolish ethnic differences. Advancing assimilation is evident in the spread of the Hebrew language, Israeli Hebrew culture and mixed marriages on the one hand, and the weak ethnic

consciousness and identity and low intensity of ethnic conflict on the other. According to this interpretation, ethnicity has become symbolic, relegated to optional and relatively insignificant spheres of life, such as pastime, foods, festivities, religious rituals and daily manners.

In contrast, the critical approach sees Jewish ethnicity as tenacious and real. It emphasizes the simple fact that Ashkenazim constitute a charter group in Israeli society. They established the new Jewish society, dominated it from the very beginning and tailored it to their views and needs. The mass-immigration of Mizrahim in the 1950s provided the state with a human reservoir amenable for meeting the urgent state needs of projecting to the world an image of a viable Jewish state, settling the remote and frontier areas, expanding the army, and widening and modernizing the economy. The accomplishment of these vital tasks was facilitated by the Mizrahi weaknesses of lower education, large families, lack of connections and absence of alternative destination for immigration. At the end of the 1950s Mizrahim found themselves in the lower echelons of society, pushing Ashkenazim upwards.

While assimilation is indeed a strong force, that mixes and equalizes Jews, ethnic barriers remain quite significant. They include a sharp contrast in the collective memory of the two ethnic groups, Ashkenazi cultural hegemony, considerable ethnic separation, overlap between the ethnic and political cleavages, substantial socio-economic gaps across generations, gross under-representation of Mizrahim in the non-political elites and the fact that Mizrahim are still suffering from negative stereotyping, low self-image and institutional discrimination. As a result, Jewish ethnicity in Israel is real rather than apparent and is and will be solidified for the foreseeable future. The three potent historical developments that have been reshaping Israeli society in the 1990s, namely, continued mass-immigration, globalization and transition to a non-warfare society, have adverse effects for ethnic equality and assimilation. They are hurting Mizrahim and keeping them apart from and unequal to Ashkenazim.

Improvement in ethnic relations took place during the first generation after 1948, especially against the foil of the troublesome 1950s. But the ethnic problem at the end of the second millennium has remained fairly intractable. Conflicting forces of continuity and change are underway, reflecting two general patterns — ethnic assimilation and ethnic dominance.

Instead of amalgamating the Jewish population in a single, unifying and homogenizing melting pot, three melting pots have been in operation in Israel in its first fifty years. One forms Israelis of Mizrahi origin (Yemenites, Iraqis, Moroccans and other Jews originating from Moslem lands), another of Israelis of Ashkenazi origin (Polish, Russians, Romanians, and other Jews originating from Christian regions), while the third melting pot consists of Israelis of ethnically mixed or detached origin. While the full Israeli group is expected by Zionism to be the largest and most significant in Israel, it is the smallest and least significant.

The split of the Jewish population into Mizrahim, Ashkenazim and “non-ethnic”

Israelis and the further diversification into countries of origin (Russians, Ethiopians, Anglo-Saxons, Moroccans and others) correspond to the strengthening of the sectorial nature of Israeli democracy. The Ashkenazi ultra-orthodox under Agudat Israel, the Sephardic ultra-orthodox and the traditional under Shas, the national-religious under Mafdal and Gush Emunim, the Arabs, the Kibbutzim and others, each group maintains its own sector.

This reality of multiplicity of cultures, subcultures and sectors creates a false impression of Israel as a multicultural democracy. The barriers for making Israel multicultural on the normative plane are both ideological and practical. Zionism as a hegemonic ideology frowns upon multiculturalism. It aspires to have a single, modern culture among the Jews, aims to combine secular Jewish heritage with Western culture and rejects Arab and Judeo-Arab culture. It views multiculturalism among the Jews as a product of the Diaspora and dispersion and as a sign of weakness. Facing the stark reality of persistent cultural differences, however, Zionism and the Jewish population have been forced over the years to develop certain tolerance toward them. Not less inhibitory is the structure of dominance. When culture overlaps with class, cultural diversity inevitably turns into cultural hierarchy. The culture or subculture of the lower classes, namely, Arabs and Mizrahim, will continue to be considered as inferior, a hindrance for social mobility and a recipe for failure. As long as the culture of the better-off who are predominantly Ashkenazi continues to be dominant, anyone who does not espouse it is understandably bound to fail.

The full and genuine Israeli will remain to be the successful, secular Ashkenazi man for many years to come. Despite the growing tolerance of other kinds of Israelis — a Mizrahi, an ultra-orthodox Jew, an Arab, a Russian immigrant, an Ethiopian Jew — they will be perceived as less Israeli, subject to negative stereotyping and more prone to failure.

True multiculturalism in the wider Israeli context would mean a social and ideological revolution. For this end Israel will have to abandon its grand Zionist mission of building a homogeneous, secular, Jewish, Western society and to shift to an open, multicultural and non-Zionist state. Groups must give up dominance they enjoy or aspire to. The full shift to multiculturalism requires that mutual tolerance takes currency. Tolerance may be built on “the agreement to disagree,” and not necessarily on liberal values (respect for personal autonomy, cultural relativism). The formation of a meaningful, overarching, civic community, uniting the particular ethnic and religious communities and sectors is necessary.

Such multicultural transformation of Israel would have different gains and losses for different groups. For Mizrahim it would mean greater integration — incorporation of their cultural expressions into the national culture, socioeconomic equality and treatment as equal. But it would also require certain losses for them qua Jews and religious. For secular Jews, multiculturalism would mean less religious coercion and more freedom from religion where religion uses the state for crafting the public domain and penetrating individual life. But they will lose dominance and the goal to

shape the entire society according to their ideals and images. For Orthodox Jews multiculturalism would provide a shield against intervention in their separate institutions and as a vehicle for preserving their own way of life. But they would lose their disproportional power and influence and will have to forgo their expansionist goal of making Israel a Halakhic state. For Israeli Arabs multiculturalism would bring about equal treatment, institutional autonomy, power-sharing and the transformation of the Jewish-Zionist state into a binational state. Yet it would increase for them the real danger of high rates of assimilation.

Multicultural democracy stands slim chance in Israel because all groups will refuse to make the necessary painful concessions and transformations (Yona 1999). Furthermore, in a broader perspective, it is a mixed blessing. Multicultural democracy will moderate some of the conflicts but exacerbate others. It will bring justice to some groups and injustice to others (the Arab *minority* would be happy with a binational state while the Jewish *majority* would feel miserable). It will cause both unity and disunity. Its emphasis on the right to be different distracts from the struggle for socioeconomic equality and social rights. It is, therefore, not clear whether the balance sheet of multicultural democracy will be positive or negative.

At the end of the second millennium, Israel has remained a society with cultural diversity or multiplicity of cultures but without multiculturalism (Kimmerling 1998). Its brand of multiculturalism is primarily dominative, inegalitarian and intolerant in nature, facing no solid multiculturalist ideology or movement. It is solidified by an ethnic-class structure that is not effectively constrained by any serious social-democratic ideology or movement.

Multiculturalism in Israel is, however, incrementally and slowly becoming more egalitarian and tolerant as a result of the growing democratization of society, erosion of Ashkenazi hegemony, increasing realization that certain cultural differences are tenacious, spread of adverse social problems and empowerment of deprived groups. Since ethnic "multi-sub-culturalism" (the flourishing of ethnic subcultures) is already an established fact, it could gradually expand to a mild form of ethnic multiculturalism.

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