



Session #3

Our Jewishness & the Jewishness of Israelis: Can Judaism be Defined?

Handout 3.3 - The Current Israeli Scene

1. A Statistical Perspective

The State of Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) uses five categories to describe people according to their Jewish religious identification:

- Haredim (ultra-Orthodox) – חרדים
- Orthodox – דתיים – Datim
- Traditional/Orthodox – מסורתיים/דתיים – Masortim/Datim
- Traditional/Not-Orthodox – מסורתיים/לא דתיים – Masortim/Lo Datim
- Not Religious/Secular – לא דתיים/חילוניים – Lo Datim/Chilonim

Boundaries among these groups can be very difficult to define, with divisions even more blurred because respondents are asked to self-identify in surveys. In general, the groups toward the top of the list are understood as being more religious/observant.

According to the CBS, the religious identification breakdown for the Israeli population above the age of twenty is as follows:

Haredim	7%
Orthodox	10%
Traditional/Orthodox ¹	14%
Traditional/Not-Orthodox	25%
Not Religious/Secular	44%

http://www.cbs.gov.il/hodaot2007n/19_07_104b.doc (Hebrew document)

The figures above do not take into consideration the ways that Jewish identification in Israel may be affected by factors like socio-economic position, education, and Jewish historical background (Jews from or whose families came to Israel from largely Christian countries as compared to largely Muslim countries).

In addition, the figures above do not show the small Reform/Progressive and Conservative movements in Israel. People in these two categories are most likely divided between the categories of "Traditional/Not-Orthodox" and "Not Religious/Secular."

The Conservative (מסורתי – Masorti) movement in Israel, according to their website, includes:

"Approximately 50,000 Israelis are members and affiliates of our kehillot and national programs, which engage some 125,000 Israelis each year. More than sixty percent of the Masorti community are native-born Israelis or come from lands in which English is not their native tongue."

(<http://www.masorti.org/about.html>)

The Israeli Movement for Progressive Judaism (the equivalent of the Reform movement) - מתקדמת – Mitkademet – "has about twenty congregations and as many as 5,000 members" according to an American Jewish Congress report by Ephraim Tabory.

(<http://www.ajc.org/site/apps/nl/content3.asp?c=ijIT12PHKoG&b=840313&ct=1051515>)

¹ Neither of these two categories is explained in the Israel Bureau of Statistic report. With that said, the categories of Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Secular, etc. come out of the European Jewish experience and do not apply Jews from elsewhere. In Israel today, about half of the Jewish population is made up of families who came to Israel from North Africa and around the Middle East. Sometimes referred to as "Aidot Mizrach" (Oriental Communities), they tend towards a Jewish observance that, although perhaps not rigidly halachic, does embrace Shabbat observance, synagogue attendance, and kashrut. Daniel Elazar provides additional background at <http://www.icpa.org/dje/articles3/sephardic.htm>.

2. Excerpt from: "The New Discovery of the Secular Believer."

(Daliah Shehori. Haaretz 12/9/02)

http://www.myjewishlearning.com/history_community/Israel/Israeli_Society/ReligiousSecular/Secular_Believer.htm

When they took part in a study on Jewish identity, students at Ruppin College came up with a term to describe themselves: "secular believer." Most of them—91 percent—defined themselves as secular, and 10 percent of this group described themselves as "anti-religious secular." Just seven percent of those taking part in the study described themselves as traditional, and two percent as national religious. Nevertheless, the study indicated that beneath the secular veneer lies a craving for tradition and religion, if not exactly as Orthodox Jews would understand it. Instead they seek a traditional religious life that is open and liberal—a live-and-let-live Judaism, a post-modern approach that accepts any expression of Jewish identity....

The term "secular believer" may sound like an oxymoron. On the one hand secular, on the other believing in God, religion, tradition. Dr. Ezra Kopelowitz and Hadar Franco conducted the study and both are aware of the apparent contradiction. They emphasize that the concept was proposed by those taking part and must be further explored by additional research. Still, Kopelowitz and Franco say this is an authentic, correct category that has been lacking in public discourse. It is a category that responds to the needs of a very large population of educated secular young people. They want to define themselves as complete Jews with a world view of their own that is not derived from religious or ultra-Orthodox Judaism, and is independent of both. By this conception, tradition should serve as a source of strength, not a nuisance and not coercion.

3. Excerpt from: "In Praise of Abnormality"

(Elisha Haas, YNET, 8/28/06)

<http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3296694,00.html>

Most of the first generation of secular Zionism departed from this world in the 1970s. It was a generation that enjoyed an exclusive privilege: The maintenance of a clear Jewish identity despite their secular way of life, which did not support this identity. However, in the process of generational change, this privilege was lost.

The experiment by generation A to provide generation B with an Israeli identity as a substitute, or alternately, a new Jewish identity, failed, and Israeli society lost the source of its strength in its existential struggle.

The Jewish and Zionist mission was replaced by a normal Israeli mission, which is the natural default option. The current prime minister expressed it well in his speech on election night: "Normal life in a country that is fun to live in."