

Deep Diversity, the Common Good, and the Israeli Future



VEN TO ITS most accomplished observers, Israeli politics is dizzying.

Case in point: In May, after a series of confrontations in Jerusalem between Israeli security forces and Palestinians in East Jerusalem, violence erupted between Israel and Gaza and simultaneously between Arabs and Jews within Israel. Arab riots broke out with an intensity that hadn't been seen since the second intifada in September 2000; Jews responded in kind. Yet weeks later, the conservative Islamist Ra'am Party became the first Arab political party to join an Israeli government coalition. Moments after we were ripping apart at the seams, a historical precedent emerged that showed Jews and Arabs moving closer together.

This is but one of many conflicting examples. Depending on the evidence you choose to emphasize, the Haredim are either more isolated than ever or are entering the workforce at unprecedented numbers. Religious Zionists are either asserting ownership of Greater Israel and

Judaism or are pioneering a new relationship between religious and liberal values. Mizrahim (Jews from Arab lands) are either mired in the social periphery of the country or are pouring into an Israeli middle class and redefining what it means to be Israeli. A largely Ashkenazic liberal elite either increasingly sees Israel as a political pariah or is recommitting itself to Israeli society. Which stories hold sway?

Israel stands at a crossroads. Do we double down on the differences between us—between Jews and Arabs, between Israel and the Diaspora, between religious and secular, conservatives and liberals—or do we find new ways of reaching out across the abyss?

DEEP DIVERSITY

In a now famous 2015 speech, Israel's former president, Reuven Rivlin, described Israel as having four tribes: religious, secular, Haredi, and Arab. The tribes have different school systems and different dreams for their children's lives, reflecting varied and often irreconcilable values. The differences are not primarily political. They are foundational. We pull apart because we are *fundamentally* different from one another.

This is deep diversity. Not the diversity of American university campuses today—the striving toward a surface diversity perhaps of skin color, but not of worldviews or goals. It is, instead, a diversity that spills outside of liberal boundaries.

How deep? Progressive advocates of Arab inclusion in Israeli politics are now confronted with the fact that the head of Ra'am, Mansour Abbas, has declared his opposition to homosexuality. This confounds the static political categories in Israel (and beyond) that misconstrued Arabs as part of a progressive Left. Does diversity make room for all Arabs, or any traditional religious groups, or only those who fit neatly into the liberal mindset? What to do about the fact that, for example, Religious Zionists often see the Arab-Israeli conflict through a religious prism—a promise made to the Jewish

people and definitely *not* to the Palestinians, with religious Muslims often sharing an equal and opposite position? How to cope with the idea that the Haredim continue to place Torah study as the core priority of their lives, more important than work or public health, not out of benighted immorality or ignorance, but as a thoughtful and intentional choice? These stated values are decidedly not liberal.

Rivlin's point is first and foremost factual: Our tribes see the world through very different eyes. But his second point is existential and political: Can we build a common life out of such deep diversity? Can we build a politics of the common good that works, well enough, for all of us?

Liberalism believes that it solves the dilemmas of deep diversity by offering the Enlightenment compromise of being “a man in the streets and a Jew at home.” Our particular identities are a private matter — perhaps sentimental, perhaps primitive, perhaps a matter of taste — this approach argues. But we build our public lives as autonomous, rational, choosing individuals, “freed” of the particularist loyalties that divide us. Policy is led by objective experts; states are collections of individuals in a transactional social contract; peace is what happens when we step beyond our parochial differences and embrace our common humanity.

From such a confident stance, forcible conversion of those who resist is really the only option — not necessarily by sword, but by policy, persuasion, coercion, and often condescension. The goal is clear: pushing a worldview onto the rest of society, one that is often in a head-on collision with others.

Such a liberal strategy, what I will call “fundamentalist liberalism,” is flawed in two key ways. The first is descriptive: Israel is not the United States, a country where liberal values, at least until recently, have been perceived to rule. Israel is Turkey, Algeria, India. It is a society with strong religious, ethnic, and national commitments. And while Israel was founded on secular liberal ideas that purposely broke with a traditional past, not all of Israel's citizenry signed on to the new liberal faith. We know from the Turkish example, where the secular-liberal

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project was pursued with the full power of the state, that such force can produce a significant backlash: the rise of a figure such as Erdogan. As Michael Walzer shows in *The Paradox of Liberation*, this is a pattern that repeats itself. Conversion as a strategy has a price.

Second, this form of fundamentalist liberalism has a flawed normative stance. Liberalism is rooted in the assumption that human beings are autonomous and rational. Its outsized focus on the individual and the protection of individual rights is an extension of that assumption. But focusing so single-mindedly on the individual ignores the larger background of social and communal solidarity, which is the fertile soil from which a shared ethos can grow. Social cohesion is a necessary condition for individual flourishing. Traditional communities, for example, are willing to sacrifice more of the autonomy of the individual in order to strengthen the ties of community. Democracy, first and foremost, is about coming together with people who are different from you and constructing a society that is “good enough” for all.

I'm a big fan of John Dewey, considered by his biographer Alan Ryan as the foremost American philosopher of the “high tide of American liberalism,” at the turn of the 20th century. Dewey's liberalism, however, was substantially different from the way we understand the concept today. His was not primarily about protecting individual rights; it was instead about “the great conversation,” the idea that we can build bridges between different people with different viewpoints and still nurture solidarity, finding pragmatic, shared solutions to

societal challenges. Not to convert, but to search for common ground. Not independence—interdependence.

Democratic solidarity is easier when societies are perceived as being homogeneous, made up of people who seem to look and think alike: the Athenian assembly, the New England town-hall meeting, the early Yishuv in Israel. It is no wonder that the strong welfare states of Scandinavian countries emerged in overwhelmingly homogeneous societies. But Israel's democracy is a profoundly heterogeneous one, far more than its secular-liberal founders were willing to admit or make space for. In Israel, democracy cannot be about bringing together people under one liberal umbrella; it must be about engaging and working with diversity in all its configurations, liberal or otherwise.

THE POLITICS OF PARADOX

To its detractors and boosters alike, the Israeli government that brought down Benjamin Netanyahu, which is sitting in power as I write this essay, is perceived as a marriage of convenience.

In the eyes of its critics, the coalition is united by only one thing: its disdain for the deposed prime minister. That the new government includes many of his former allies seems to prove the point. To many of the government's boosters, on the other hand, it emerged primarily by a shared commitment to avoid a fifth election in less than three years. Something had to be done, the argument goes: Political parties had to abandon their ideological axioms. The lowest common denominator was the best to be hoped for.

But these explanations miss the mark. This government is a manifestation of a new phenomenon that has been gaining traction in Israel over the past decade, promising a credible path forward for a deeply heterogeneous society, and indeed for all societies that wrestle authentically with diversity. It could of course unravel in the coming weeks, and the next election could be around the corner, as

happens here in Israel. But we should nevertheless recognize that something of import is taking place with this fledgling coalition.

Under the radar, beyond social-media echo chambers, and outside the toxic culture wars where all leftists are traitors and rightists are fascists, people in Israel have been searching for a way to live together. Through my work at Shaharit, a “think-and-do tank,” I have watched this phenomenon emerge, nurtured it, and seen it take hold. Its growing leadership is made up of people that Tehila Friedman, a former member of Knesset, calls people of the borders: people anchored both in their own worldview and communal commitments, and in a commitment to building together with others, with all the compromises and contradictions that this entails. People who see cultural and moral complexity as a societal asset and not a zero-sum game. People who come from different and often conflicting worlds of meaning, the dizzying kaleidoscope of Israel's body politic: Haredim, Arab Muslims, Mizrahi traditionalists, Jewish liberals in Israel (and abroad), Ethiopian and Russian immigrants and their Israeli-born children, Religious Zionists, and Bedouin and more. They are people who recognize that our futures are embedded in our ability to hold on to our own identity while creating bonds through our differences, rather than somehow trying to ignore or transcend them.

Just a few examples to color this in: Moshe Morgenstern, a Haredi city-council member from Bnei Brak, holds the health portfolio while the coronavirus is rampant and Haredi compliance is sketchy—and must navigate his commitments to community and to public-health imperatives at the same time. My friend and Shaharit co-founder, Nazier Magally, who brought a delegation of fellow Israeli Arabs to Auschwitz in 2003 in order to do an act of “radical empathy.” Idit Silman, a member of Bennett's Yemina Party and the majority whip for the current government, a religious Mizrahi woman who brings together members from all of the political parties on initiatives such as food security, preventing violence against women, early childhood education, and cultural sensitivity in the schools.

Through hundreds of people like Moshe, Nazier, and Idit, we are learning how to navigate through deep diversity to build the bridges necessary for a healthy, thriving democracy. The lessons we're learning are relevant not only to the culture and political wars here in Israel, but to any place struggling to find productive, constructive paths through difference.

First, culture matters. Deep diversity starts by embracing our cultural differences, not ignoring or flattening them—and definitely not disdaining them. Theological commitments to the Land of Israel, for example, are not an obstacle; they are a necessary part of the conversation.

Second, Rivlin's tribes are primary to most of our identities (and claiming not to have an allegiance to a tribe is one of the central characteristics of the liberal tribe). When sucked into the culture wars, we all hunker down, retreating into battle mode behind our walls, believing that it is only *our group* that is being threatened. When a conflict with our group's identity is ignited, we return to that first and most basic allegiance.

Third, feeling acknowledged and accepted is a necessary condition for replacing walls with porous borders that can allow connections and commonality to emerge. It takes courage to truly open oneself to the world as seen through other people's eyes, but everyone has the power to do this. When the educational leadership of the Haredi-Mizrahi Shas Party met the secular-liberal leadership of the Association for Civil Rights in Israel (ACRI) in strategic meetings to find ways to relate to each other, it was ACRI's humility and generosity of spirit that allowed the Shas leadership to respond in kind. When, during the heart of the riots in May, Mansour Abbas (considered by most progressives to be primarily the "victim" in the Jewish-Arab dynamic) visited a torched synagogue in Lod and committed himself to its rebuilding, he opened up the gate for the "ultra-nationalist" Naf-tali Bennett to invite him to be a coalition partner. Recognition and acknowledgement in all directions change the dynamic.

Fourth, relationships need not be conditional on ideological

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commitments; they can be the core of our commitments, as with family. When the new prime minister, Bennett, calls the heads of rival political parties in his coalition by their first names—Mansour and Gidon, Benny and Yair, Merav, Yvette, and Nitzan—he is modeling the importance of personal relationships. First names matter. All good community-organizing work nurtures relationships as its core principle. Unlikely alliances are built on human relationships that create a foundation for working together, breaking out of viewing social change as one group pitted against another.

And last, loosening ideological straitjackets leads to new possibilities. When those who see the world from different vantage points are considered partners and not adversaries, what Lord Maurice Glasman calls "a politics of paradox" emerges. The dissonance between different perspectives gives birth to different options. Peace looks different when we integrate the full range of perspectives, not only liberal-based ones. Economics looks different when we listen to the populist revolt as well as the globalist discourse of start-up nation. Policy takes on new meanings when we consider a broad range of cultural commitments and sociological perspectives.

The new Israeli government's crossing of divides is not happenstance. On the night that Yair Lapid received the mandate for forming a new government, he wrote on his Facebook page: "This has been my mission: finding the common good; pulling Israel from conflict to consensus." Bennett and Lapid have been political friends on and off for almost a decade, and their addressing each other with the term *Achi* ("bro"), a term of affection and fraternity, hints at a

relationship that allows both of them to cross their ideological divides.

The coalition's attempt to bridge divides is far from perfect. Most significant is the populist critique that this is a government of elites, especially Ashkenazi elites, what some call "First Israel." Bennett and Gidon Saar, head of the right-wing coalition partner Hope for Israel, and their partners from the center-Left, all share a familiarity of status and social codes. In contrast, the Likud has been a party supported by "Second Israel," the Mizrahi lower and middle class, ever since Israel's populist revolt and Begin's ascent to power in 1977. So a rage brews against this government: that the elites and "the deep state" continue to control the civil service, the media, the courts, and business interests, pushing a globalizing, liberal agenda in economics and in cultural values. There is a good case to be made that the elitist-populist divide is in fact the central fault line of Israeli society. Without addressing it in fundamental ways, it will continue to threaten the future of democracy, here and throughout the world.

TOWARD THE COMMON GOOD

A politics of the common good puts its focus on sociology, not ideology; on a less confident, more curious posture toward what needs to be done. It embraces the deep diversity of Israel's tribes, while nurturing the interplay among them, and it builds solidarity from which new possibilities can emerge. This common good, a set of shared values and a shared ethos, cannot be dictated from above; instead, it emerges through a growing network of connections among people willing to have porous boundaries, rooted in and nurtured by a true acceptance of our differences.

Liberalism has brought many positives to our shared lives in the public square in Israel as elsewhere: freedoms of expression, property, religion, movement, representation, and equal status before the law are all commonplaces, even as, on the edges, we argue about their boundaries. But for these ideals to succeed in becoming part of

the fabric of a heterogeneous society, they must be in dialogue with other worlds. Religious feminism (which liberal fundamentalists would describe as an oxymoron) is not the capitulation of conservative values to liberal standards; it is something else, a new hybrid that is coming into being. The growing acceptance of homosexuality is similar: More overt commitment to marriage and traditional family structures by the homosexual community dovetails with conservative communities' growing acceptance of less-traditional families to create something new. The movement of one side makes it possible for the other side to move as well. When hybridization works, it works in both directions. We meet at the center, which as Maimonides—and Aristotle before him—pointed out, is not the compromised middle between two ideals, but the golden mean.

Jewish tradition gives us a language for exploring divides. The two great legal traditions of Shammai and Hillel were often at odds, but Judaism accepts them both as arguments "for the sake of Heaven." Hillel's position became the halakha (law) because his students were "kind and gracious," teaching both their ideas and those of the students of Shammai, and even teaching Shammai's opinions first (Babylonian Talmud 13b). This is a model not of ideological warriors, but of intellectual modesty that understands that none of us has direct access to Truth. Each of our sociologies, each of our worldviews, holds a piece of truth; only together can we transcend our limitations and come closer to the Kingdom of God.

The future of Israel's democracy, the continuity of the State of Israel, can assume two different forms. One, self-righteous and ideological, will pull us inexorably apart. The other, more modest in its claims and more generous in its sensibility, will reach out to find partners who can pull us together. The jury is out as to which direction will win, both in Israel and around the world.

I'm betting on our better angels—on Moshe, Nazier, Idit, and countless others emerging from under the radar in city councils, NGOs, and now in national leadership—to lead us to a future that is good enough for everyone, together. *