IS ISRAEL ABANDONING ITS SECULAR ROOTS?

Developments in Israeli society are leading to the disassociation of Zionism from secularism **By Gol Kalev**

ON A warm day in August 1898, a historic journey began. Theodor Herzl convened the First Zionist Congress in Basel, Switzerland to start the process of returning the Jews to their ancestral homeland. Before a word was spoken, Herzl insisted on placing this journey in context: The Congress was launched by thanking God for bringing the Jewish people to this moment – "Shehecheyanu!" (A Jewish blessing used to celebrate special occasions.)

The Jewish faith and religion remained core to Herzl's Zionism, though after his death in 1904, Zionism evolved towards becoming a staunchly secular movement.

The over-secularization of Zionism was a gradual process. After 1904, political Zionism faded into hibernation. None of the seeds Herzl's planted with European leaders, such as the German Kaiser, the Turkish Sultan and the British Colonial secretary, yielded tangible results.

While political Zionism reached a dead-end in Europe, practical Zionism was making progress in Palestine, through land purchases and settlement. Consequently, the settlers in Palestine, even though a small minority of all Zionists at the time (fewer than 1% of Zionist Congress delegates), had set much of the ethos of the fledgling Zionist movement.

The early settlers had disproportionate power in the Zionist movement. The most vocal among them was a small group of secular Jews, led by David Ben-Gurion, who arrived on the Second Aliya (1904-1914). They were increasingly gaining influence at the expense of the religious settlers from the First Aliya (1882-1903) and the Old Yishuv (pre-1882).

For many of these young secular settlers, Zionism was a revolutionary movement consistent with other revolutionary movements of the time: Its aim was to create a new Jew significantly different from his predecessors. Part of this rebellion was against religiosity and rabbinical Judaism.

When war broke out and the British conquered Palestine in 1917, the Zionist political infrastructure was awakened and rebuilt, but was now influenced by a new reality that to a large extent, was set by those young settlers.

Ben-Gurion and his colleagues went on to take over the political institutions of Zionism in the 1930s and shaped Israel's secular narrative through its 1948 independence.

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One-tribe nation? Orthodox and secular Jews mingle in Jerusalem

Moreover, an artificial lock was placed on secular-religious issues in Israel. Given the nascent state's existential issues, a decision was made to defer issues of religiosity to an unspecified later date, and until then lock-in a "status quo."

This status quo became itself "sacred." Religious issues have since been examined relative to the status quo: Is a particular proposal consistent with or does it violate the status quo?

But the status quo quickly became inconsistent with Israel's demographic development. A year after Israel was founded and the status quo solidified, the country's population doubled. The incoming immigrants of the "mass migration" were mostly religious and traditional Jews from the Middle East.

As a result, the status quo was reflective of the secular bias of the founders at the expense of the religious/traditional tendencies of the majority.

JUST LIKE in Europe today, there was a strong effort to integrate those new immigrants from the Middle East. Iraqi, Moroccos, Yemenite and other Middle Eastern Jews were encouraged to "Israelize" into the melting-pot ethos which carried strong secular motifs. Perhaps some even hoped that those immigrants would abandon their "primitive" religious behavior and embrace the enlightened secular themes of the founders; that they would be "Europeanized."

But in recent years, a gradual shift of power and narrative has occurred, away from the old elites towards the religious/traditional majority, estimated to be about 60% of Israel's Jewish population by the Central Bureau of Statistics (other estimates are even higher). This includes the ultra-Orthodox (Haredim), National-religious and traditional (whom in the US and Europe could be classified as religiously observant). Such a shift of power is an expression of the greater democratization of Israel and is reflected in politics, the military and culture.

For example, until the mid-1980s, Israeli radio stations would refused to play Middle Eastern or Sephardi music. The mass demand for such music resulted in an underground industry of improvised cassette-stands in Tel Aviv central bus station, selling the popular music.

The shift of power from the secular minority to the religious/traditional majority is just part of the story of Israel's greater embrace of religion. A bigger shift is occurring among secular Israelis themselves.

Just as Ben-Gurion and his generation rebelled against their parents, who were characterized by strong Jewish religiosity, younger Israelis are now rebelling against Ben-Gurion and his colleagues, who stripped them of Jewish content.

A Jewish resurgence has emerged among secular Israelis. This is enabled by the broad array of meeting points with Judaism that are now available to the secular Israeli. In the past, in order to closely engage with religiosity, a secular Israeli needed to become religious ("make tshuva"). This involved a radical lifestyle change, which carried with it an enormous social and family burden. It was perceived to be an all-or-nothing deal. But today, a secular Israeli can engage with Jewish religiosity while staying secular. A new Israeli secular has emerged: The "Datalf" – an acronym for the sometimes religious who consume religious experiences à la carte.

Unlike European seculars, the vast majority of Israeli seculars were never atheist nor agnostic. They always felt a strong connection to the Jewish religion, which they expressed in various "non-intrusive" manners: In the believing in God, in fasting on Yom Kippur, in having life-changing events observed with religious ceremonies.

But anything beyond that was tended to be suppressed or performed with some degree of apologetics. A secular person walking to a bar mitzva in a synagogue on Shabbat, would wait until the last moment to put a kippa (skullcap) on his head, not to be suspected of turning religious and perhaps adhering to the motto of "be religious at home and an Israeli outside."

But things are changing. Consistent with the increasingly liberal and pluralistic environment of Israeli society, the Datlaf is now "out." In Tel Aviv, Shabbat services are now offered in secular neighborhoods and attended by seculars who do not observe Shabbat. In Jerusalem, secular people visiting the Western Wall are seen keeping on their kippot long after leaving the holy site.

While the Datlaf range is broad, it is fair to say that Datlaf is the predominate stream of Israeli secularism. Unlike the Israeli traditionals, who tend to be driven by respect to family and heritage, the Datlaf engagement with religion is organic. The Datlaf chose to stay secular and to stay Orthodox, utterly rejecting America-imported Reform Judaism.

It is clear, then, that the synagogue that the secular Israeli chooses not to attend is an Orthodox synagogue. The growing engagement of secular Israelis with religion is facilitated by developments in Israel's religious society itself. The religious community's high ideology, culture of volunteering, giving and military service, led to strong affections from secular Israelis.

Military commanders, the subject of much admiration in Israeli society, used to be secular Jews from a kibbutz or a moshav. Now they are increasingly kippa-wearing religiously observant people. This makes the kippa and the Jewish religiosity it symbolizes a more visible icon of Israeli Zionism.

In addition, in recent years, there are more and more points of interaction between seculars and religious Israelis. This is in part due to the rise of the "religious-lite" – those staying religious, while consuming western experiences associated with the broader Israeli public. A secular Israeli now interacts with a national-religious person not just in the military and in the workplace, but also in bars, cafes and in just about every aspect of Israeli life. There is a long list of national-religious people who have risen to prominence in hi-tech, business, academia and science.

THIS IS a sharp contrast to the 20th century, when the national-religious community was perceived to be, as Israeli author Amos Oz put it, "the kosher inspectors in the Zionist train's cafeteria."

Indeed, the national-religious sector replaced the kibbutz as the Israeli utopia. Just as in the 20th century secular Israelis idealized kibbutz life without having any interest to join it, so it is now with the national-religious community.

The increased secular affinity to the national-religious population is complimented with growing acceptability of the Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) population.

The Haredim, who at the onset rejected Zionism, believing that the return to the promised land needs to be done through a Messianic process, are now predominantly Zionist (openly or de facto), with a few exceptions. In addition, most Haredim have abandoned Yiddish and converse in Hebrew.

The composition of the Haredi population itself has changed and now includes more Sephardi Haredim, who tend to be more connected to the overall public. Haredim are more involved in Israeli industry and society, while staying in their insular communities. For example, Israel's health minister, Yaakov Litzman, is Haredi and highly regarded by secular Israelis.

Haredi contributions are noteworthy too. For example, Haredi medics save thousands of Israeli lives every year through United Hatzalah, a Haredi medical volunteer organization that swiftly dispatches medics on motorcylces to the scenes of accidents, heart attacks and other emergencies, well ahead of ambulances. Similarly, Yad Sarah, a Haredi charity organization provides wheelchairs and other medical accessories at reasonable prices to all Israelis.

Just as the national-religious Israeli is no longer viewed as the kosher inspector of the Zionist train's cafeteria, the Haredi is no longer perceived as the stowaway free-rider on that train.

While strong disagreements remain, mostly with respect to Haredi service in the Israeli military, a Haredi is increasingly viewed by the general Israeli public as a person and not as a ghost of the Jewish past. These processes reduce the built-in anti-religious bias that once stemmed from secular anti-Haredi prejudice.

Secular Israelis' devillainizing of the Haredi and their strong affinity to the national-religious, together with a democratization trend, all contribute to the disassociation of Zionism from secularism.

But the ultimate enabler of Zionism's return to Judaism is the "de-sectoring" of Israeli society. In Israel's first few decades, anybody who was not part of the secular mainstream was placed in a sector: The national-religious sector, the Ultra-Orthodox sector, the Arab sector, the Sephardi sector. Such exclusion was arguably important in creating the melting-pot narrative and the "Israeli icon." Now that this Israeli icon is strong, there is ample room for reversing the melting process.

As a shift occurs towards a more a pluralistic and diverse society, an Israeli can pick and choose from the smorgasbord of various Israeli experiences that suits him regardless of his own background. Indeed, many Ashkenazi Israelis enjoy Sephardi music, such as by popular singers Sarit Hadad and Eyal Golan.

The de-secting is demonstrated through the spectrum of experiences, including in politics. The large Yesh Atid party of Yair Lapid, which is perceived to carry the secular flag, had a national-religious rabbi as its number two and a Haredi as one of its representative in the Knesset. Similarly, the National-Religious party has a secular person as its number two. By the same token, the secular Yesh Atid party attracts religious voters, while the National Religious Party (now called Bayit Yehudi) attracts secular voters.

Contrary to popular myths about Israeli tribes moving further and further apart, Jewish Israel society is one of the most unified in the world for a country of such size.

Every nation has divisions and "tribes."

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Ultra-orthodox in the IDF: A Nahal Haredi swearing-in ceremony

A gay playwright in Los Angeles is very different from a rancher in Texas. An African-American living in subsidized housing in The Bronx, is very different from a white investment banker living nearby on Park Avenue. A French intellectual in Paris has little in common with a French-Algerian merchant in Marseille. Indeed, some argue that European countries are evolving to become a condominium of parallel and unrelated societies. This is facilitated by Europe turning post-ideological.

But Israel is rooted in a bedrock of solid ideology – Zionism – in a similar way that the United States is rooted in "Americanism." That is why both nations can weather strong internal disagreements and challenges, while maintaining a common vision and principles. Consequently, the distinct Israeli sectors represent a celebration of Israel's diversity and success.

Visiting a bar in Machane Yehuda, Jerusalem's social hotspot, one would find Haredi Jews interacting with seculars, national religious Jews, non-Jews, tourists and visitors. Similarly, every Thursday night in Jerusalem's Zion Square, gay activists sit in a circle with Haredis to have a civil dialogue.

The one-tribe nation which is emerging out of the "de-sectoring" of Israeli society, allows Israeli seculars to broadly and frequently consume more religious experiences.

On top of this, broader Israeli societal trends give backwind to the abandonment of Israel's over-secular past. One is the gradual shift in Zionist ethos from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem – from the secular mecca towards the religious capital.

For example, from 1968 to 1996, all prime-ministers from the Labor party were from Tel Aviv, and even from Ramat Aviv neighborhood, considered then the elite of Tel Aviv. Since 2006, both of Israel's prime ministers have been from Jerusalem.

Another contributor is the spike in immigration of French and American Jews, the increase in lone soldiers who come from abroad to serve in the Israel Defense Forces – many of whom are Orthodox Jews – as well as the increase in vacation-home ownership in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem.

Such populations import both Jewish content and feelings into Israel. Synagogues in Tel Aviv that were once empty are now revived, and trendy kosher restaurants have sprung up. Religiosity is not just more visible in secular Tel Aviv; it is fashionable.

Another subtle contributor to Israel abandoning its strong association with secularism is a shift from the early cultural and political influence of Europe towards the contemporary influences of the United States.

America, like Israel, is a religious nation of believers. Europe is the world's flag-carrier of secularism and atheism. Such differences are only getting wider, as there is a religious resurgence in America alongside greater religious rejection in parts of Europe.

Just recently, for example, a woman was denied French citizenship solely because she insisted on practicing her Muslim faith (which prohibited her from physical contact with men, including shaking hands).

Europe's intensifying conflict with its Muslim population alongside its rigid politically-correct culture have made European Christians and Jews nervous that Europe's aggressive actions against Islam are turning into aggressive actions against religion.

As Israel turns from Europe to American influences, it is also pivoting away from European idolization of secularism towards a greater embrace of religion.

Israel's abandonment of its secular roots removes a hurdle to the historic Jewish transformation that began in Basel 120 years ago.

Shortly after the journey commenced by thanking God, Herzl delivered his keynote address, outlining his vision. "Zionism is the return to Judaism even before it is the return to the land of the Jews," he declared.

Such a return to Judaism was defined by Herzl as "coming home."

Indeed, Zionism has now turned into the vehicle by which Israelis are coming home to Judaism. ■