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WHAT IS ISRAEL'S EDUCATION POLICY?

Eliezer Schweid

Forging an Israeli Socio-National Identity / The Progressive Decline of Humanistic and Jewish Studies / Will Peace Exacerbate Internal Divisions? / The Undermining of Social Integration / Avoiding the Mistakes of America

[Editor's Note: We are pleased to inform our readers that Jerusalem Center Vice President Eliezer Schweid has been awarded Israel's highest honor, the 1994 Israel Prize, for his contributions to Jewish thought. Every year a handful of Israelis are given this award, with different disciplines represented in different years. Those of us who know Professor Schweid have long been aware of his very significant contributions to contemporary Jewish thought in Israel and to bridging the gap between religious and non-religious Jews. We are very pleased to present this article as another of his many contributions to the Jewish people through the Jerusalem Center. — D.J.E.]

Forging an Israeli Socio-National Identity

What socio-national messages is general State education transmitting? This question has been subject to vacillations and controversy ever since the State Education Law was enacted. The *ex post* "consensus" was: To avoid direct ideological messages (to the extent possible) and to rely on indirect messages in the curriculum and the social

composition of the school. Occasionally, however, there was an *ad hoc* focus on some aspect of the national agenda that had proved particularly irksome, such as national unity, emigration, or issues of democracy and peace.

The most influential of these indirect messages seems to have been the one embodied in the "social integration" policy, as articulated in the Free Compulsory Education Law that applies to all children in Israel. This policy incorporates and reflects, in practice, the way the institutions of state actually construed the meaning of having established the State of Israel as a Zionist nation-state, responsible for absorbing immigrants and forging an Israeli socio-national identity. This policy also expressed an adherence to the values of social democracy, especially in the aspiration to achieve equality in principle of all social groups and in efforts to balance and bridge ethnic and class disparities. In the sense of national identity, the message of the educational integration policy was to foster a feeling of national solidarity, awareness of interdependence, and willingness to assume joint

Daniel J. Elazar, Editor and Publisher; Zvi R. Marom, Associate Editor; Mark Ami-El, Managing Editor. 13 Tel-Hai St., Jerusalem, 92107, Israel; Tel. 02-619281, Fax 972-2-619112. © Copyright. All rights reserved. ISSN: 0334-4096.

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responsibility. This message was reinforced in its application with respect to service in the Israel Defense Forces.

Has the general State school system also exhausted its ability to inculcate the heritage of shared national culture and to create a socio-spiritual discourse among Jews of different origins and ethnic groups, among members of different socio-cultural classes, and, especially, between the "religious" and the "secular"? There has always been a bottom line in teaching that is taken for granted: the very fact that the school is Jewish-national in terms of language, coupled with an all-out effort to impart the Hebrew language to recent immigrants, together with instruction in several humanistic and Jewish subjects: Bible, general and Jewish history, and general and Hebrew literature. However, the question of the cultural message imparted in the course of this study at the post-elementary level is fairly complex: Are these subjects given due emphasis compared with that given to other subjects which are deemed "utilitarian" and "useful"? Are the subjects taught in a way that presents the students with meaningful spiritual challenges? Is the material set in a sufficiently broad and deep cultural context? Does the teaching of these subjects give all pupils a shared load that suffices to create a circle of spiritual discourse among them?

The Progressive Decline of Humanistic and Jewish Studies

The answer is the subject of much dispute. Some observers replied in the affirmative, others in the negative. The latter demanded an expansion, a broadening, a modification of the value attitude used in teaching, with more emphasis on the shared content. However, there is no purpose in rehashing past controversies in view of the process actually taking place "in the field." Today, teachers with a vested interest in humanistic and Jewish studies no longer seem to engage each other in debate. Primary schools, it is true, place a maximum of emphasis on the educational aspect of teaching and do their utmost to transmit cultural messages, but such messages are for children's consumption only or signify that general spiritual development, integration, and cultural identification are needed only at the primary level. This is because post-primary education has witnessed over the years a progressive curtailment — a tendency declining to zero, in fact — in the scope of humanistic and Jewish studies, the respect and esteem that schools and parents attach to them, and the budget allocation for the formation of

a core curriculum in the humanities and Jewish studies which would be considered a shared undertaking for all schoolchildren. Such a core curriculum has virtually crumbled in the wake of the reduction of classroom hours and the policy of free teacher choice in a scholastic "supermarket" in which all commodities have shelf space.

The Education Ministry and school administrations silently confirm the adverse significance of these processes. The proof is a growing dependency on extramural "education agents" such as various "Jewish-Zionist institutes," Geshet, and, for some time, even Chabad. These "agents" have spiced teaching in the schools with pseudo-didactic extracurricular activities that lack methodology. The schools willingly accepted these services when offered, thus acknowledging the insufficiency of their efforts to inculcate a culture that shapes national identity and a shared circle of spiritual discourse. It was, in fact, a demonstration of public guilt feelings. It also, however, pointed to an unwillingness to overhaul the system and assume responsibility for imparting culture through standard school channels. Indeed, the schools' recourse to "subagents" lent substance to the acknowledgment that post-primary schools were entrusted mainly with "preparation for life" in the sense of acquiring a prestigious career, not in the sense of developing and enriching students' spiritual personality, of socio-cultural integration, or of joining a shared circle of national and spiritual discourse. Needless to say, since the general State school system favored this approach in its capacity as the main "education agent" in Israeli society, even the humble contribution of the "subagents" was, in fact, neutralized. From the pupils' standpoint, it was, at most, a marginal and non-binding diversion. Its main "mission" was to exorcise the overburdened educational establishment's guilt feelings and provide an answer to the irritating criticism of "intellectuals."

Will Peace Exacerbate Internal Divisions?

Nevertheless, this irritating criticism made itself heard now and then. The debate resumed each time anew, usually because of annoying public phenomena that had not been anticipated — for example, the growing numbers of Israeli-born young people and demobilized soldiers who emigrate, or incidents that highlighted social "disparities," "alienation" and intersectorial animosities, especially between the "religious" and the "secular." This being so, the critics will undoubtedly mount a new offensive in view of the struggle for implementation of the peace accords. The education

system will not be able to distance itself from the confrontations that will afflict both the pupils and their parents. It will have to intervene and speak to the point.

If so, how will the "system" cope with its students' questions? What message will it transmit that will create harmony among them? How and by what means will this message be delivered? The questions have already been asked; the agile politicians have already formed an information policy. The controversy has begun and will surely intensify. However, the quandary that will demand the full attention of leading educators will soon arise because of long-term concerns: If the peace agreements achieve their goal and liberate Israeli society from the existential pressures that have united it thus far, and if, concomitantly, conscription and military service play a much smaller role in shaping this society, will this not aggravate the existing *kulturkampf* to the extent of creating irreparable schisms? Will it not amplify the impact of cultural assimilation and loss of national self-identity among precisely those population groups that the general State schools serve?

Indeed, we are making an especially sharp turnabout this time. To contend with it, one must analyze not only the significance of the changes that have occurred so far in the education policy of the general State schools but also the meaning of the social and cultural processes that are transforming the nature of Israeli society with stunning speed. These processes have set the existential stage for the political debate surrounding the peace agreements that were signed and the way they are to be applied, and have direct repercussions on social and cultural life. Consequently, they are already subjecting education policies to massive, direct pressure.

Let us begin by stating that the political controversy concerning the peace agreements transcends differences in ideologies and values; it reflects conflicts of interest within the socio-economic leadership of different groups in Israeli society. These differences cause an explicit, frontal clash as to the definition of Israel's national interest, even as the country also struggles to define the characteristics of its identity as a Jewish state. With this collision in the background, the debate on spiritual issues of Jewish identity, too, has taken on the contours of social-class conflict, which, in turn, converts spontaneously into a cultural confrontation. The facts are already hard to conceal: ponderous and direct social pressure is being applied to the shaping of education policy in the general State schools in a manner that is

absolutely unprecedented, and it is being generated largely by successful, affluent, and high-status groups that wish to invest the resources earmarked for education in a functional educational policy that corresponds to their values, expectations, and demands. These, it transpires, have little to do with imparting cultural heritage and answering questions of national identity. Such issues are of no concern to them, because they are satisfied with the identity and leadership that they have.

The Undermining of Social Integration

The most salient indicator of the impact of such pressures, and the most conspicuous manifestation of their significance in the realm of values, is the changing attitude of the Ministry of Education toward the social integration policy as a tool for the advancement of socio-national solidarity. Has anyone stated his or her intention to rescind the policy of social integration in education? "Heaven forbid!," reply those in charge of implementation and control. Has anyone asserted an intention to jeopardize this sacred cow, whose sanctity is still a political asset that generates electoral profits? Together with these self-sanctifying denials, however, they also mention totally "kosher" rationales that, ostensibly, justify measures that have the practical effect of dismantling the integration policy piece by piece. Who, for example, opposes the fostering of "excellence"? Would anyone deny the importance of free choice for pupils among various courses of study? And who would presume to question parents' right to intervene for the sake of their children's education, to express an opinion, to help and, in particular, to contribute financially to the schools that their children attend?

The last-mentioned issue is, naturally, the one that reveals the underlying danger. The interests that lurk behind these "kosher" rationales, which should be applied in a balanced manner that does not jeopardize the integration policies and the schools' educational and cultural messages, indicate that good arguments are merely a front for trends that are shaping an Israeli society that postures as "successful" and "high-class":

1. Socio-economic disparities within Israeli society appear to be growing. Practically speaking, Israel has reached the stage of coalescence as an American-style capitalist state, in stark contrast to the social-democratic infrastructure that it had possessed when it took its first steps. The vestiges of this infrastructure are rapidly vanishing today. The competitive elitist orientation, which seeks its rewards in terms of standard of living

and status, reinforces the myth of individualism and neutralizes motivations of social or national solidarity. The irony of this is that the parties that pull most strongly in this direction are those of the center and the left. Examination of their policies shows that the concept of "leftism" has already lost its social-value significance and focuses on aspects of political dovishness. The old-time Israeli proletariat has "fulfilled itself" in terms of capitalist achievements, and it is their children who wish to extend these achievements to the fields of education and culture right now.

2. The effects of pressure applied by the postmodern scientific and technological establishments are gaining strength. These establishments are based on a certain unilateral, ultracompetitive type of excellence, one resting on narrow, restricted professional specialization rooted in functional efficiency. To bring this about, the elitist humanistic aspirations that aim to achieve the integrated formation of a spiritual personality with lofty, broad cultural interests are renounced. Indeed, the status of the humanities, inferior to begin with, becomes much more inferior as one climbs the educational ladder from primary school to university. This brings the phenomenon into such focus that no one can deny or camouflage it (if anyone is still seriously interested in doing so). All post-primary schools are placing a growing emphasis on scientific, technological, and administrative subjects. When people speak of "excellence," they are really referring to one thing only: well-recompensed achievements in these fields. This trend is fashioning a policy that is being applied by means of several mechanisms: matriculation examinations, university selection procedures, and, naturally, the structure of the curricula.

3. American cultural models are having a greater impact in fashioning the Israeli social ethos and lifestyle. By this, I refer not only to mass entertainment culture but in particular the institutionalization of socialization processes, especially during childhood; the fashioning of relationship models in the family and the rapidly declining status of the family institutions; the competitive ethos that gives the system of social relationships their contour; and the disaffiliation with tradition and cultural origins. The settings that have replaced youth movements as the agents that shape the culture of youth — for youth movements have practically disappeared from the Israeli social scene — and the various mass media constitute, in this respect, both the overt vehicles and the primary agents of education.

4. The clash between aspirations for individualistic and ethically permissive "self-fulfillment" and the

projections of the collective wish to develop an autonomous national cultural ethos has become more intense. One already finds manifestations of it, not only in total ignorance of matters of heritage and culture, but also in blindness to the importance of deeply embedded cultural, national, and historical consciousness. People do not know because they do not want to know, and they do not want to know because they are unaware of the importance of the spiritual component in the development of personality and the proper fulfillment and functioning of social, family, and community life. The mass media and the common theatrical arts represent the trend and spread its messages.

5. Finally, alienation between the "religious" and "secular" population groups has become so strong that the latter public has lost all interest in developing its own affinity with the sources of its national culture. It has abandoned them from a position of consent, accepting the religious public's contention that it is the sole heir and legitimate exponent of "Jewish sources." Insofar as the question of national identity still perturbs the general State education system, instant experiential solutions are sought in the form of visits to Nazi extermination sites in Poland. In this respect, the key seems to be held mainly by the party leadership, which immerses itself in the issue for political reasons.

The nadir in education, caused by the drastic budget cuts of recent years (and, to a large extent, by the deprioritization of education in the government's budget considerations), gave various social agents a clear, broad path for direct intervention in shaping the contours of education. In this fashion, the combined impact of the processes described above has found direct, blatant expression. In retrospect, this may have been for the best; it has given Israeli society a warning that it must not disregard before time runs out, since the price of today's watershed in the official education policy of Israel may prove to be exorbitant.

Avoiding the Mistakes of America

What kind of price may this be? It hardly seems necessary to present the Israeli reader with gloomy prognostications. It is already happening, and anyone interested in observing the results that they will generate in the relatively short term need only contemplate contemporary American society, in whose footsteps Israeli society is following in its ravenous hunger for short-term material achievements and reward. The American middle class, materially successful and well-off, is wasting away; around it are growing masses of alienated, hostile, backward, and failing people, who

have no chance of extricating themselves from the depths of their cultural and ethical degeneracy, and unable to achieve a minimum of material satisfaction except through violence and heinous crime.

What are the implications of such a situation for the fabric of the "successful" and "rewarded" society? What is this society's social, family, community, and national ethos? How deep do its intellectual springs run? Opinions on the answers to such questions are divided between those who are attracted to and repelled by social messages of this kind. It is absolutely clear, however, that a cultural/national edifice capable of withstanding the challenges that Israeli society will face in the era of peace cannot be based on a social ethos, components, and values such as these.

In view of what we have seen above, the conclusion to draw about Israel's education policy may be summarized as follows: Within the context of a broad social policy that will restore Israel's lost sensitivity to social justice and equal opportunity for all social groups, the social integration policy must be defended against all inroads. Moreover, awareness of its value messages should be heightened. Parents' involvement in their children's education and parent support of schools are important values that should be implemented in different ways, but not through financial contributions that create class differences between schools in different neighborhoods, convert affluent schools into full-fledged private schools, and lower the performance of those schools that remain public. Fostering excellence is another lofty goal, but its cultural dimensions and social ethos must be properly defined, and it must be the goal not only of the upper crust but of Israeli society as a whole.

Indeed, above and beyond issues of social integration, the status of the humanities and Jewish studies in all post-primary schools should be reexamined. The Ministry of Education is currently developing a new program that will reevaluate the status of the subjects studied and redesign the way they are taught; it seems that they have actually begun to apply it without opening the matter up for public debate. Once again, this is an intrinsically positive educational trend which seeks to give the humanities their proper place in the curricu-

lum and, thereby, mitigate the burden on students of the proliferation of different, separate subjects. In fact, the practical result of this program will be yet another drastic curtailment of attention to the humanities and Jewish studies, coupled with an increase in the share and status of functional subjects, especially natural science, mathematics, and computer science. This will demolish the equilibrium that the system has still been attempting to maintain, by the skin of its teeth, to keep the culture taught in schools from being totally one-sided.

Of course, no one questions the importance of teaching that leads toward specialization in functional subjects. However, the emerging intention to reinforce such studies by reducing the share of the humanities and Jewish studies to near-zero must be curbed. Serious harm has already been caused; Israel faces grave national and cultural challenges. Consequently, the Ministry of Education should now take action to reinvigorate and reinforce such studies. Above all, it must redefine, in a broad, timely, and conceptually challenging sense, the core of required studies, until they become the basis for an enriching and profound circle of cultural discourse that will endow its participants with a shared spiritual identity.

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Professor Eliezer Schweid, a Fellow of the Institute for the Study of Educational Systems and a Fellow and Vice President of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, has published widely on medieval and modern Jewish philosophy, Hebrew literature, Zionism, and current affairs. He is the author of numerous books including *Wrestling Until Day-Break: Searching for Meaning in the Thinking on the Holocaust* and *Democracy and Halakhah*, both to be co-published in 1994 by University Press of America and the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs. Professor Schweid has also been an active member of the Senior Scholars Seminar of the Jerusalem Center's Beit Vaad (Academy for Jewish Public Affairs) since its inception in 1991.

Fundamentalist Islam and Israel: Essays in Interpretation

Raphael Israeli

This book provides an in-depth account and analysis of Islamic fundamentalism today, a powerful religious movement having the most far-reaching goals, and how it has an impact on Israel's relations with the Arab and Islamic worlds. What Dr. Israeli has to say is important not only for Israelis but for the whole Western world, which now confronts revivalist Islam, not only in the Middle East but in Europe itself, and even in such far-flung fragments of European civilization as the United States and Australia. While the West has yet to learn how to deal with this movement, this book should be a great help in developing a proper understanding and a proper strategy to do so.

Co-published with University Press of America, 1993, 220pp.

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**The State of Israel, The Land of Israel:
The Statist and Ethnonational Dimensions of Foreign Policy**

Shmuel Sandler

The impact of the nation in foreign policy is not synonymous with that of the state. Understanding the effect of the nation is important because of the contemporary reawakening of primordial national aspirations. This study examines nation-centered concerns in foreign policy as practiced within Israel. It reviews and analyzes the roots of the territorial dimension in Israeli foreign policy since the establishment of the state up to the present; the impact of Israeli domestic politics; and the rise of ethnonationalism in Israeli foreign policy.

Greenwood Press, 1993, 300pp.

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The Political Economy of Israel: From Ideology to Stagnation

Yakir Plessner

The failure of the Israeli economy can be explained by its departure from the institutions and rules which govern predominantly market economies. Israel's economy has been operating on principles too far from European Liberalism (or American neo-Conservatism) and too close to Socialism. While national imperatives may have been a reason for ignoring economic considerations, ultimately this strategy led to domination of the economy by the government and the systematic exclusion and distrust of private enterprise. As long as the economy is not reformed to create a hospitable climate for private investment, Israel will not be able to extricate itself from economic stagnation. A major critique of Israel's socialist economy, this work is part of the JCPA's study of the political economy of Israel.

State University of New York Press, 1994, 330pp.