Approaches to Jewish Studies in Secular Israeli Society

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Jewish studies have been a focus of controversy from the very beginning of Zionist educational thinking. In Eastern Europe the Zionist revolution, like every other, created its own world-view with a new set of symbols and myths. The new, revolutionary model was the Jew, proud to belong to the Jewish nation and versed in its unique culture, but at the same time thoroughly at home in European culture, with its content and values. Towards this end, the updated modern heder was established, where pupils learned subjects like singing and gymnastics, along with Hebrew language and literature, Bible, Jewish history, the geography of the Land of Israel, Torah (with some passages omitted) and, from Grade 6, Talmud.1

The early 20th Century saw the establishment of the Tarbut network of secondary schools that combined Hebrew and general education.2 At the same time, Jewish studies became a field for scientific study and research,3 while schools in the Land of Israel also changed the priorities in their Jewish studies curricula. Emphasis swung from the Talmud to the Bible that portrayed the 'beautiful', 'normal' Jew; the curriculum share of Talmud and Midrash, representing rabbinical Judaism, was reduced accordingly. Apart from portraying national 'normality', the Bible became a link to Christian Europe and universal values, as expressed principally by the Prophets. All were perceived to be in complete contravention to the Talmud, which symbolized the

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1 S. Stein, A Program for Schools and Modern Heders, Vilna 1908. All references in this article are to publications in Hebrew.
isolation and alienation of Jews in the Diaspora. Not only the schools harked back romantically to the Bible, so did the educational thinking of Labor Zionist leaders. Berl Katzenelson wrote: 'There would be no new Hebrew literature, and the Zionist vision could never have emerged, since actual contact with the land was cut off, except that this Book maintained the link with our Homeland'.

Itzhak Tabenkin wrote: 'The spiritual world of the Second Aliyah immigrants cannot be described without mentioning the special influence the Bible had on them. The Bible is the spiritual image of a people conquering the land by work, a people living in this [not the next] world ... the immediate relationship with the universe, with nature, the social and national struggles, all are reflected in the Bible'.

Some cultural leaders, however, voiced concerns about clinging exclusively to the Bible, among them Aḥad HaʾAm: 'It is impossible to leap over thousands of years of history, and to educate Jews as if they belonged to Isaiah's generation. If the intermediate links are removed from the chain of history, the beginning and the end can never be united'. And later on: 'From out of an excess of zeal to wash the child's soul clean of Diaspora influences and bring him back to the ancient "source", you will confuse him to the point where he has no idea of his place in the world he lives in, and of his relationship to the rest of his people still ruled by the spirit of the Exile'.

Following this perception, some educators wanted to include, along with Bible studies, selections from the Talmud and the Midrash related to the Land of Israel, to the holidays and to universal ideals such as caring for the poor, the weak and the stranger, justice and the rights of the worker. Nevertheless, after World War I, the place taken by religious studies became far less prominent. Eventually education in the school system was divided into two streams: a religious and a general stream; concurrently with the development of schools seeking to combine nationality and religion, was the development of general schools that stressed secularism.

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4 B. Katzenelson, *Writings* 11, Tel-Aviv 1945-1950, pp. 32-33. The translation of this passage into English, as well as subsequent ones that appear in the article, was prepared by Betty Rosen.

5 Minutes of the Seventh Teachers' Meeting, *Protocols*, 1892.

6 Aḥad HaʾAm, *At the Crossroads* 3, Berlin 1930, pp. 82-94.
In the first decades of the 20th Century, prayers, Aggadah and Mishnah were still part of the Hebrew literature and Bible curriculum in Grades 1 to 7 in the general (secular) school system: in the Labor Movement schools Aggadah was combined with Bible studies; the Hebrew literature lessons and the school's social activities related to the holidays of the Jewish calendar.

In the mid 20th Century, in the first years of the State of Israel, secular society had a very clear image of the ideal Israeli identity, one that had its roots in and affected all spheres of life. In social life, this expressed itself in dress, conversational style and behavior in general - extreme informality, contempt for the Diaspora and its behavioral patterns, inter alia through the suppressing of emotions and adherence to an ideology. In cultural life it nurtured a renewal of Hebrew creativity relating to the burning questions of people and homeland, working the land, shaping its landscape, and the like. The leisure culture of its youth was rooted in the framework of pioneering youth movements, with an emphasis on hiking the length and breadth of the country, Hebrew songs, folk dancing, and discussing the issues of people and country. Secular society, endeavoring to reconnect with the country, the land, with a life of work and creativity, and to the Hebrew language, embraced the Bible, which described a compatible reality. That society also adopted the Hebrew calendar, and in particular, those Jewish holidays that embodied connection with the land, giving them an Israeli coloring which highlighted links to the natural landscape and to agriculture. The kibbutzim and moshavim were particularly active here, influencing general education through the Labor Movement schools.

This homogeneous social perception clearly included curricula in the general education system, which gave a steadily increasing importance to Bible, Hebrew language and literature and, to a greater or lesser extent, to Jewish history. Post biblical Jewish culture was studied only incidentally, through aggadot included in Hebrew literature anthologies used in the classroom, in preparation for the festivals, or in the Oral Law curriculum, which had a decidedly minor, though fixed, place in the school timetable. Jewish thought was completely outside the 12-year curriculum.
Officially, the National Education Act of 1953 created two separate educational streams: secular and religious, which had already become the norm in actual practice. Each established its own system of teachers' training and its own humanities curricula. The national religious system was directed and operated by the religiously observant, for students who were observant and it was committed to a curriculum centered on Jewish studies. By contrast, secular education - principals, teachers and students - held widely varying views regarding Jewish culture and how to teach it.

The Bible retained its primary place in Jewish studies, as opposed to the situation in the Diaspora and to that of the Old Yishuv (the Orthodox, pre-Zionist Jewish community), where the Oral Law was the dominant subject, and Bible study as a distinct subject was so limited as to be practically non-existent. The Bible was seen as the main source for the study of history and Jewish culture. Teaching it in this manner made national humanistic education with no commitment to religious faith possible. Obviously, it is a distortion, if not a paradox, to perceive the Bible as a national symbol and the Talmud as a religious one. First of all, the Mishnah and the Talmud do not have the divine aura of the Bible; secondly, they influenced the history and culture of the entire Jewish people for a longer period than the Bible.

Over the years, however, as the status of the Bible became established, inter alia through the matriculation exams, other facets of Jewish studies lost their importance, shrank and were shunted off to the margins. The results of not studying post-biblical Jewish culture were apparent among graduates of the secular school system from their total ignorance of basic Jewish concepts and content. On occasion, when such ignorance became a public embarrassment, protests were voiced against the inadequacy of Jewish studies in the secular sector. Some dissent arose as a result of the deplorable impression Israeli emissaries made in overseas Jewish communities. In all of them - whether secular or religious, Reform, Conservative or Orthodox - the wide-ranging literature of the Oral Law, and all that is derived from it, is the significant representative of Judaism. Against this background, and because most protests came from religious people, the solution seekers tended to reintroduce texts with a specifically religious orientation into the secular...
education system. This in itself raised problems. Instead of acquainting their students with the narrative of the Jewish people, its values and its means of cultural expression, which need not produce opposition, most of the texts were related to religious ritual. Thus in 1955 the Minister of Education, Zalman Aranne, set up a 'Committee for Israeli Jewish Awareness in the Curricula of Secular and Religious Schools'. The very fact of putting the two together reflects a mistaken notion regarding the possibility or need to teach religious concepts in the secular schools. Indeed, Aranne's activity drew criticism from both sides. The religious sector maintained that the very act of setting up the committee testified to the bankruptcy of secular education, stemming from doing half its job, when a complete job means educating to observance of the Commandments. The secular sector, understandably, criticized the dominant ceremonial aspect of the curriculum as harking back to outdated customs.7

The criticism that came from both sides exposes the root of the problem in the Aranne plan, and in others based on the same premise which appeared over the years. The root of the problem lies in identifying teaching Jewish culture with a religious education. Yigal Allon, Minister of Education in 1973, realized this. Addressing the Knesset, he maintained that the Aranne Program contained passages on folklore and customs, but no qualitative teaching of Judaism. He proposed to 'develop [an acquaintance with] Judaism through intimate knowledge of a selection of texts from the Mishnah, the Talmud and the sayings of the Sages, and a selection of philosophical and literary works drawing on these sources, and discuss them critically from a historical and scientific standpoint'. Aaron Yadlin, the next Minister of Education, also expressed the issue well: 'Israeli society was a creation of the mainly secular Zionist movement; the belief in God and the sanctity of the halakhah should not be imposed on it forcibly, from above'. Later he asked: 'How then can we find our way to the Jewish heritage without a religious approach'?8 He provided no answer, but various educators, both secular and religious, who combined scholarship in

7 Z. Adar, Educational Problems in Israel, Jerusalem 1969.
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Judaism with practical work in education, pondered the problem and offered solutions. They asked themselves how to present the treasures of Judaism to students in the secular schools, the majority in Israel's Hebrew education system, without preaching at them and without emotional displays that would put them off.

Thus my esteemed teacher, the Orthodox Rabbi Professor Benjamin de Vries, as early as 1953, published an article about teaching the Talmud in secular secondary schools. He called for teaching the talmudic style of debate, for introducing halakhic concepts and the halakhic way, not the Commandments as law. He made an apt distinction between religious learners interested in religious law as it is laid down, including the ways of life it enjoins, and the secular public, who may be interested in logic and in human and social values, but not in laws and questions of faith.

Later, Dr. Meir Ayali of Kibbutz Yifat, at the opposite end of the social and political spectrum, was concerned lest the next kibbutz generation's culture become 'Mao-style Chinese, or a drug-inspired vision, or even cultural suicide, instead of a culture based on general human values in which the Jewish heritage was so formative a force'. According to him, to create such a culture one must understand that: 'Clinging to the creativity of the ancient past [the Bible] and ignoring everything created in the intervening period, is no more than a time bridge over a chasm that does not exist'. He strongly urged that the Oral Law be taught in kibbutz secondary schools, adding that the Bible does not constitute the difference between Judaism and other cultures, and 'as is', in its literal form, did not shape the image of Judaism; rather the interpretations it received from generations of Sages, and the spiritual and practical meanings derived from them, did.

I would be rehashing the same ideas [lit. grinding flour] if I discussed the religious and moral sublimation of the ancient material of the Bible over generations, or if I repeated the examples everyone knows, from all the varied sources, that show to what extent the Oral Law and later thought, interpreted and even

complemented the Bible to provide the full content of Judaism. Whatever would we do with our humanistic awareness, and how would we deal with Torah commandments like those of the rebellious son, the rebellious city, an eye for an eye, and other capital laws, or with concepts like the sacrifices and ‘visiting the sins of the fathers upon the children’, were it not for the commentaries of our Sages in Tractate Nezikin [Damages] and elsewhere in the Talmud, in Rav Hai Gaon and in the Rambam, among others? Our adherence, throughout the generations, to that book [the Bible], making it relevant to every generation by means of interpretation and commentary, completes the chain that links us with the entire age-old system called Judaism ...

Allowing myself a digression into the personal and the picturesque, I maintain that my inspiration for settling near the Kishon, in the Jezreel Valley and my claim for this land, come not only from the ancient conquests of Joshua and the wars of Barak, but because of the chain that connects these distant times, through Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi, compiler of the Mishnah, who too settled in this valley, down through all the interpreters of the Mishnah in every generation.10

In 1972, Professor Eliezer Schweid’s article ‘Teaching Jewish Subjects in Israeli Secondary School’ called for ‘basing Jewish education in the secular school system on imparting knowledge, not on shaping awareness’. This essential change could occur through systematically teaching the Oral Law, which, he wrote ‘is the rich cultural creation that went on continuously from the Bible to modern Hebrew literature’, and it is ‘Jewish history in its active and creative sense’. Schweid views teaching Jewish history without teaching Jewish creativity as of no value; hence the Oral Law should be taught as a uniquely creative academic subject.

All three writers, different as their backgrounds are, make two common demands: 1) To include the Oral Law in the national education curriculum: this stems from their national-cultural orientation, and is

10 M. Ayali, ‘Is the Torah Fated to be Forgotten’, Revivim and Tel Aviv 1971, pp. 113-119.
not associated with political views or religious faith. 2) To teach the Oral Law as an academic discipline, 'to impart knowledge, not to shape awareness'. These points accord with the goals of the secular education system set forth by law,11 'Education should be based on the cultural values of Israel and on loyalty to the Jewish nation'.

Nevertheless, despite the fine words on the importance of Jewish culture, the reality went from bad to worse. Bible studies, firmly anchored in the curriculum by the matriculation exams, kept drifting farther away from Jewish studies as conceived of in the circles mentioned above, marginalizing related fields until they were no longer taught. The explicit reasons given were lack of class hours and an overloaded curriculum, sometimes even the need to satisfy parents by introducing more 'relevant' subjects. The real reason, however, seems to be the cultural polarization which has been steadily intensifying in Israeli society ever since the war of 1967. This had a number of demographic causes: immigration, mainly of 'the enlightened Orthodox' from the United States on the one hand, and mass immigration of Jews isolated from Jewish culture from the former Soviet Union on the other. An additional cause of polarization was the protest movements of Jews of Eastern origin, which combined protests over a suppressed culture and low social status with religious perceptions that looked primitive to the secular public, including to many educators. All this exercised conflicting effects on the system: inappropriate religious material was brought in by those who wanted to impose religious values on the secular schools, and in response, other educators sought to reduce or even do away with all Jewish content.

The prevailing situation when Zevulun Hammer became Minister of Education in the mid 1970's was that many schools were not teaching Judaism at all. Genuinely concerned lest the Jewish spirit vanish from most Hebrew schools, he decided to take steps, and set up a committee for the intensification of Jewish education. However, this very step politicized the issue, which resulted in a further reduction of the academic teaching of Jewish studies in the secular schools. Thus the downhill slide continued, while turning this important educational area into a

11 National Education Act, 1953.
political battleground. Jewish studies remained in the curriculum or were eliminated from it according to the power relationships in the Ministry of Education.

Here is a brief point-by-point account of events:

1. Jewish studies were directed by religious people who not only were unaware of the needs and perceptions of teachers in the secular schools: they also set out to shape a religious awareness and propagate faith and religious observance among those who had no desire for them.

2. Large sums budgeted for Jewish studies made generous benefits possible in the form of class hours, instructors, teaching materials and the like, to compliant schools. Thus tendentious curricula and teaching materials, not edited or examined by professional standards, were introduced. Worse, principals became accustomed to reaping benefits by agreeing to use them. This being the situation, no wonder the academic teaching of Jewish subjects lost its place in the school schedule.

3. Following the generally prevailing views of educators motivated by specific ideologies, Jewish studies were based on the emotional involvement of the students. To that end, curricula and material were planned that did not include cognitive and intellectual activity, or training in any specific, relevant skill. Moreover, learning activities were deliberately of a sporadic nature (such as one time projects, seminars and the like), so that principals, teachers and students all perceived the teaching of Jewish studies as a matter of chance, with no continuity and hence of no importance.

4. Topics developed were for the most part religious, provoking opposition from secular teachers and even from parents.

Due to the foregoing missteps, Jewish studies came to be regarded as a caprice of religious politicians - occasional studies introduced for the economic advantages they brought to the school - angering secular teachers, who were now confirmed in their mistaken identification of Jewish culture with religion. Consequently, when a political upheaval once again allotted the Ministry of Education to the Labor Party, eroding the power of the committee for the intensification of Jewish education,
the secular school system was entirely 'free' of Jewish studies except for Bible. The opposition prevailing among teachers when Hammer was minister destroyed any chance to distinguish between teaching to shape awareness and teaching to impart knowledge, which any Jew of culture, as such, should have found positive and desirable. Even the Shenhar Committee, set up by Hammer in his second term as Education Minister (1991) in order to examine this issue in the secular schools, voiced objections regarding everything that smacked of Judaism as a religion. The committee recommended a return to the status quo ante relating to Jewish studies, but demanded that teachers should come from the secular sector only, and employ 'the accepted analytical tools used for teaching other subjects'. This shows just how deep the rejection of the existing situation was, and how great the fear of perpetuating it.12 The Shenhar Committee's recommendations were to have been carried out during Shulamit Aloni's tenure as Minister of Education. However, during that short period and under her successor, Amnon Rubenstein, the voices objecting to Jewish studies grew stronger, including the voice of Nimrod Aloni, who even founded the Association for Humanistic Secular Education, dedicated to opposing any subject that smacked of particularism, Jewish studies included.

The Ministry set up committees to carry out the Shenhar recommendations. These brought together requests from dozens of groups which wanted a part in Jewish education and proposed methods for improving it, most of them having a political-ideological agenda. On the one hand, the various secularist groups wanted to put an end to the study of Jewish texts, not distinguishing between religiously oriented teaching and learning a subject for the sake of the culture it portrayed. On the other hand, those with a religious world-view wanted to impose religious education on the national school system. Once again, both the Education Ministry officials and those who sought to intervene from the outside, proved incapable of seeing the difference between teaching and preaching, between imparting a culture and indoctrination.

Jewish studies continued to sink in the morass of religious and

anti-religious politics when Zevulun Hammer was appointed for his second term and this despite his efforts, and those of his successor, Itzhak Levi, to set up an authority to carry out the Shenhar Committee recommendations. A partial list of the groups who applied to that authority with a view to intervening in its activity, shows beyond any doubt the pendulum movement of political control over Jewish education. Once again the Ministry of Education was in the hands of a religiously observant minister, and again it was an opportune moment for those who wanted to impose religious education. Thirteen out of the 14 groups trying to intercede belonged to the three religious movements within Jewish society.

In the Ministry's next phase, with Yosef Sarid as minister, the perception of Jewish studies once again changed radically. It was decided to stop teaching Oral Law and Jewish thought and to create a new field of study, 'The Culture of Israel'. Its purpose was to reduce the proportion of canonical Jewish texts in the curricula in order to make room for integrative study that would stress the culture of the last two centuries. The teaching method preferred by the powers that be was, of course, a minimum of close reading of texts, with a maximum of open discussion on identity, Judaism, common destiny and other such endlessly expandable subjects.

While the couriers were still en route in hot haste to spread the official message that disbanded professional committees and appointed other ones, to reduce hours devoted to Jewish studies in favor of other subjects, a new political upheaval gave the education portfolio to a minister from the nationalist camp. It appears that just as the late Education Minister Hammer could not distinguish between religious education and imparting a culture, so the present minister is unable to differentiate between religious nationalism and a national culture. To her 'credit' stands a new educational area, 'Heritage', a hodge-podge of concepts, laws and folklore to be taught in junior high schools by teachers with no professional training in Jewish subjects. There is no need to waste one's breath on the stupidity of this approach, now employed in the secular school system, which debases the teaching of Jewish subjects to a level previously unknown.

Despite all the foregoing, one tries to end on an optimistic note.
The present chairman of the educational secretariat, Yaakov Katz is trying to create a core curriculum for Jewish studies, one that will be binding on the entire educational system. It is a worthwhile goal, but it remains, as yet, in the verbal stage. In reality, the only breath of optimism comes from the universities, some of which have taken up the challenges posed to them by the Shenhar Committee and developed M. A. courses in Jewish studies. In these courses, graduates of one or another field of Jewish studies are instilled with a deeper knowledge of Bible, Midrash, Mishnah, Talmud, Commentaries, medieval Jewish thought and modern Jewish philosophy; that is to say, into the main opus that makes up Jewish culture. They learn to read such texts from a critical, rather than a religious, point of view. If these academic programs continue and flourish, then graduates, with the knowledge, abilities and the perceptions they have acquired, may be able to open the eyes of educational policy makers and school principals, and stir up awareness of the importance of developing an affinity to Jewish culture, and to teach its texts as the sources of our national culture.