Challenges to Israel's Identity

Where is Israel Going? Inner Challenges Facing the Jewish and Democratic Identity of the State of Israel and an Outline for Confronting Them
by Moshe Hellinger (with Baruch Zisser)
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Pnina Sharvit Baruch

In *Where is Israel Going?* Moshe Hellinger examines—as indicated by the book's subtitle—challenges to the Jewish and democratic identity of the State of Israel, and proposes a framework for confronting them. The author explains that while the integration of Jewish and democratic perspectives is a convention embedded in the heart of the Israeli Jewish consensus, some circles in Israeli society call this into question—whether questioning the Jewish aspect, the democratic aspect, or the synthesis between them. The book paints an interesting yet worrisome picture, while offering thought-provoking ideas on how to confront these challenges.

In the first part, the author describes approaches of various sectors and addresses the challenges these approaches pose to the state's Jewish and democratic identity. He divides Israeli society into cultural groups: the Arab minority, non-Jewish immigrants, religious Zionists, Mizrahim with a traditional orientation, immigrants from the former USSR, the Ethiopian community, and secular Ashkenazim. These groups are analyzed with various academic studies; the book is therefore a convenient resource for anyone looking for source material on the topic. On the other hand, this approach turns some chapters into a literature review, at times making it difficult to elicit a clear and comprehensive picture.

Obviously, any attempt to attribute a common denominator to members of any one group risks over-generalization, and the author is aware of this problem. The division into groups also makes it hard to relate to phenomena stemming from other contexts. For example, the analysis dealing with individualistic and hedonistic tendencies in the younger generation, appearing in the chapter devoted to the secular Ashkenazi elite, also applies to the younger generation of the Mizrahi traditionalists, as this is more a generational than ethnic matter. By locating this analysis in the chapter dealing with secular Jews, the author creates the impression—though it is not explicitly stated—that a connection to the Jewish tradition reduces these tendencies.

The author devotes the second part of the book to challenges posed by post-Zionist radical left ideologies and nationalistic right ideologies, both religious and secular. In the chapter dedicated to the post-Zionist challenge, the author relates to two main approaches: positive post-Zionism and negative post-Zionism. The first views the goals of Zionism in a positive light, but maintains that these goals have been realized, thanks to the establishment of a strong, affluent nation; now it is time to ensure full equality for all of Israel's citizens. The second rejects the Zionist enterprise a priori, viewing it as an unjust project that must come to an end, while adopting the Palestinian narrative from an anti-Zionist perspective.

The chapter dealing with the nationalistic right is three times longer than the chapter devoted to the radical left, and for good reason. The author contends that the radical left's

views are held by only a very small part of the Jewish public in Israel, though they may still be prevalent in various university departments and among artists and cultural icons. By contrast, at present, the nationalistic challenge, both religious and secular, is much greater to the democratic identity of the state, and, according to the author, also to its Jewish identity. The chapter presents the development of religious Zionism from the Hapoel HaMizrahi era and the beginning of the Mafdal era, characterized by both political and religious moderation, to a present in which the nationalist aspect has been greatly enhanced. The shift began mainly after the Six Day War and the start of the settlement enterprise in Judea, Samaria, and the Gaza Strip, when settlement of the Land of Israel became the supreme manifestation of Jewish identity, thus weakening the universal dimension of Judaism, and with it, weakening the commitment to democracy. At the same time, the non-religious political right was also undergoing a change:

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the right began with the liberal values espoused by Zev Jabotinsky and Menachem Begin, but then adopted ethnocentric nationalistic trends, including signs of intolerance toward the Arab minority and left wing positions. The author demonstrates that nationalistic expressions once considered illegitimate are now acceptable to large segments of Israeli society, which is currently more ethnocentric and nationalistic. These trends challenge Israel as a liberal democracy.

The third part of the book examines several core issues reflecting the complexity of integrating Jewish and democratic aspects in the image of the State of Israel and its Zionist identity. The three main issues examined are: citizenship and the Law of Return, which applies only to Jews, with no right of return for Palestinians; Israel's control of Judea and Samaria, where Palestinians lack civil rights; and religious coercion and the relationship between religion and state. The author feels these issues can be resolved, while maintaining the Jewish and democratic nature of the state. He argues that it is possible to justify the Law of Return and the lack of a right of return for Palestinians while still maintaining Israel's democracy. By contrast, the ongoing occupation and the denial of civil rights to millions of Palestinians are highly problematic for Israel's democratic foundation, and it is therefore necessary to work toward a two-state solution while preserving Israel's security interests. As for the religion-state issue, Hellinger believes it is imperative to reduce religious coercion in Israel, as this directly infringes on the rights of anyone who is not religiously observant.

In the last chapter, the author lays out his own approach, which calls for a synthesis between religious Judaism and liberal democracy. Hellinger's main thesis is that an attempt to create a valid democracy in Israel cannot be based solely on Western liberal democratic values; it must also be based on the unique cultural elements of the society and people, i.e., the Jewish heritage. In his opinion, such an approach has the best chance of being accepted by the Jewish public in Israel, much of which is influenced more by Jewish tradition than by liberal democratic values.

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universal elements in the Jewish tradition that are aligned with the general values of universal morality. Adopting Jewish values of social justice can thereby strengthen Israel's democracy, as can weakening the central government and strengthening political decentralization. Furthermore, it is possible to learn about human dignity from Jewish sources. At the same time, Hellinger calls for the adoption of a liberal democratic ideology that is committed not only to universal moral values but also to communal values. This entails solidarity with one's own group, which in the Israeli context means the Jewish people, while still maintaining equality toward the Arabs and other non-Jewish minorities in Israel.

Hellinger, himself a religious Jew, elaborates on how principles of social justice and political decentralization, derived from Jewish sources, can be applied in the Israeli context—thus reducing gaps in Israeli society, strengthening the regional dimension, and allowing cultural autonomy for different segments of society. He proposes reducing the impact of the coercive religious establishment, which is one of the factors that drive many in Israel away from any Jewish religious tradition. He also calls to adopt a more humble Israeli discourse instead of the prevalent aggressive discourse, which would make room for acknowledging the injustices to Arabs and Palestinians without skirting the responsibility the other side bears and without conceding claims on the moral justification for Zionism. In particular, he suggests adopting universal approaches embedded in Judaism that stress human dignity (the human being as created in God's image) instead of the particular collective notion of giving Jews absolute precedence over non-Jews.

Hellinger acknowledges that his general approach and proposals might be viewed as unrealistic, given the current atmosphere in Israel. Nonetheless, he believes that this does not excuse him from making suggestions that are morally correct and practically beneficial.

His idea of stressing the Jewish values of human dignity, humility, and justice, as well as his striving for a policy that takes non-Jews, including the Arab minority in Israel and the Palestinians in Judea, Samaria, and the Gaza Strip, into consideration is laudable, as are his liberal approach to the religion-state balance and his opposition to religious coercion. It is important to highlight the existence of Jewish approaches that promote democratic and universal values, so that the nationalistic ideologies are not branded as the only correct ones from a Jewish perspective. The rise of moderate Jewish voices such as Hellinger's could both affect the worldview of some religious Jews and influence how secular people view Judaism. It could also improve relations with Diaspora Jewry, especially in the United States, where Jews tend to have a liberal outlook. However, it is hard to envision Hellinger's moderate stance on political and religion-state issues currently adopted by the rabbinical leaders and other policymakers in religious Zionist and ultra-Orthodox circles. Unfortunately, for many years, the consistent trend in these sectors has been toward greater emphasis on particular nationalist values, conservative religious worldviews, and above all the Greater Land of Israel as a leading value. As such, any hope that the state's Jewish identity, to the extent it is defined by these circles, may be translated into liberal values of universal justice seems slimmer than ever before.

The world as a whole is experiencing a regression of liberal values and a surge in nationalist and even ultra-nationalistic values, which seems to be a counter-reaction to an over-acceptance of universal liberal worldviews that ignore collective elements and national feelings. Hopefully, this is not a unidirectional trend but the swing of a pendulum that in the future will see liberal values return to the forefront, albeit with greater consideration of legitimate national feelings than in the past.

Within the non-religious Israeli public, many hold right wing nationalist and even ultra-nationalistic values, but it seems that the chance of changing these outlooks and strengthening liberal values based on a non-religious discourse is higher, because the non-religious public is more open to hearing a range of opinions and because it is more accessible. Moreover, the non-religious leadership changes more frequently and holds less rigid and ideological worldviews than their religious counterparts and is also more open to influence from the outside. The world as a whole is experiencing a regression of liberal values and a surge in nationalist and even ultra-nationalistic values, which seems to be a counter-reaction to an over-acceptance of universal liberal worldviews that ignore collective elements and national feelings. Hopefully, this is not a unidirectional trend but the swing of a pendulum that in the future will see liberal values return to the forefront, albeit with greater consideration of legitimate national feelings than in the past. If this happens, liberal values intertwined with a national worldview might gain strength also in Israel. As such, realistically, the hope for countering the threats to the democratic character of the state lies primarily in strengthening a political leadership with liberal values. The chance such leaders may emerge from the religious Zionist sector seems remote indeed. Nonetheless, it is important to think of Judaism as a source for liberal and democratic values, and there is great value in stressing Hellinger's message, namely, that there is no contradiction between the state's liberal democratic aspect and its Jewish identity.

Col. (ret.) Adv. Pnina Sharvit Baruch is a senior research associate and head of the Law and National Security Program at INSS. She was formerly head of the IDF's International Law Department, where she provided legal counsel to senior IDF personnel and the Israeli government relating to the laws of armed conflict and the occupation of territory, and other aspects of international law relevant to IDF activity.