



# And Yet...

By Menachem Kellner

One of the most hackneyed things one can say about Israel is that it is a land of contrasts, which is, perhaps, a polite way of saying that it is a land of contradictions; and that, in turn, may be a polite way of saying that Israel is not a normal country, despite the best efforts of the “normalizers.” Consider the following:

- Israel now has the least popular prime minister in the nation’s history, Ehud Olmert, yet, as of this writing, he enjoys the most stable parliamentary majority in recent memory. He appears to be unelectable in the next election, but the two parties seeking to replace him have each chosen as their leader proven failures, each of whom was unceremoniously dumped by the electorate.

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*Professor Kellner, born in the United States and educated there and in Israel, has taught Jewish philosophy at the University of Haifa for the last twenty-seven years. He has written, edited or translated sixteen books and scores of articles in the fields of medieval Jewish philosophy and modern Jewish thought. Two of his most recent books, Must a Jew Believe Anything? (Oxford, 1999) and Maimonides’ Confrontation with Mysticism (Oxford, 2006) were short-listed for the National Jewish Book Award.*

- Israel’s economy is booming in unprecedented ways, yet the country now has one of the greatest gaps between rich and poor in the Western world.

- Israeli researchers are receiving Nobel prizes, yet, as I write, both high school teachers and university professors are on strike, bemoaning cutbacks in education spending.

*When I look out at Israel from my little corner in Haifa, I see a society overcoming unbelievable challenges and reinventing itself every few years in new and unexpected ways.*

- For the first forty years of its existence, Israel had one of the world’s only functioning socialist economies in a free society, but in the last twenty years, Milton Friedman has replaced Vladimir Ilyich Lenin as “chief economic rabbi.” From an economy of entitlements, we have been hurtled into an economy of “I’m-alrightniks—and if you’re not alright, it’s likely to be your fault.”

- The Israeli government provides the lion’s share of university budgets, and it is precisely these universities that provide a home to an array of non-, post- and anti-Zionists—a small minority of whom come very close to flirting with what would be called treason in any other society. My colleagues at Haifa University and I are training the future leaders of Israel, and a small number of us are bitter enemies of the State.

- Israel has a prominent newspaper read by the country’s political, intellectual and artistic elite; yet this newspaper often appears to have been co-opted by the non-Zionist Left. Anti-Semitism used to be defined as “disliking Jews more than is really necessary”—one might say that *Haaretz* dislikes Israel and Zionism more than is really necessary.

- Israel has the strongest army in the Middle East (thank God!), with the most advanced weaponry and the most dedicated soldiers (as we saw in the Second Lebanon War), yet we lost the propaganda war to Hezbollah. Indeed, the stronger we get on the ground, the more our enemies abroad—in unions, in newspaper editorial departments, on university campuses, in chancelleries



Photo: Ariel Jerolimski

and in foreign ministries—seek to demonize and delegitimize us.

I have listed here a long series of aggravations. Let me list one more: For years I have been active on the Internet, supporting Israel's right to defend itself, sacrificing precious time that I would

- The Knesset, Israel's legislative body, is a 120-member unicameral parliament that operates in plenary sessions and through 15 standing committees.

- All Israeli governments since 1948 have been based on a coalition among several parties. To date, no single party has received more than half of the 120 Knesset seats.



have much preferred to spend with Rambam, in order to wrangle with people who are either fools, knaves or both. I have written endless letters and published two long articles. All this is a result of the fact that I came to the sad realization that I had spent the first half-century of my life in a bubble of time, a bubble unique in the history of the Jews over the last two millennia. Jew hatred, I was then convinced, was a thing of the past. But facts on the ground have shown me to be wrong. Political and social forces with which I used to be allied, who call themselves “progressive,” have proven themselves over and over again to be viciously and unthinkingly anti-Semitic. A hatred I thought had died with Hitler and Stalin, a hatred I always associated with the forces of reaction and stupidity, has proven itself to

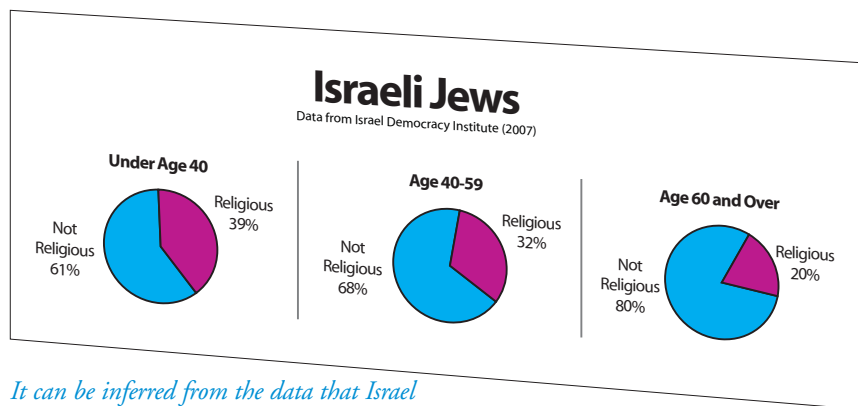
be very much alive, and has found a home in precisely those precincts that should abhor it.

Given this change in my thinking, it will come as no surprise that when British academics sought to boycott Israel, I became very active in fighting their efforts. Imagine my surprise when I discovered that almost all of my Israeli-born colleagues were wholly uninterested in the matter! Even getting most university administrators to pay attention to the threat was like pulling teeth: hard work, and unpleasant for all involved.

And yet, despite all this—and I could go on at much greater length, bringing up, for example, the vexed issue of Jewish-Arab relations—there is much to be grateful for and hopeful about. I can hardly speak for all Israelis, but when I look out at Israel from my little corner in Haifa, I see a society overcoming unbelievable challenges and reinventing itself every few years in new and unexpected ways. My wife and I see it as our task and challenge to contribute towards making that rein-

vented society more Jewish, culturally and historically, while preserving and strengthening its democratic character. Others are doing that, of course, in more systematic and effective ways. The rabbis of the Tzohar movement, for example, seek to present a face of Orthodoxy rarely seen in Israel: IDF veterans involved in Israeli life who are flexible where halachah allows it, these rabbis see *all* Israelis, not only regular synagogue-goers, as their congregants.

And yet, more and more young Israelis are refusing to abide by a tragic agreement struck by their grandparents—and ours. According to that agreement, secularists gave up all claims to their Jewish heritage, allowing Orthodox Jews of various stripes to take ownership of that heritage. I was witness to a sad example of this phenomenon a few months ago, at a teach-in for our POWs in Gaza and Lebanon. The head of our student union gave a moving presentation and ended it with “Although I am not religious, I would like to close by citing a passage from the Torah.” This young man felt the need to *apologize* to his listeners for quoting a




*It can be inferred from the data that Israel is becoming an increasingly traditional society.*



The Tel Aviv skyline. Tel Aviv, like many Israeli cities, has undergone explosive growth in recent years.

Photo: [www.sassontiram.com](http://www.sassontiram.com)

- 25 percent of Israel's population live in the country's largest cities: Jerusalem (732,100), Tel Aviv (384,600), Haifa (267,000), Rishon LeTzion (222,300) and Ashdod (204,400). 6 percent live in small towns, while less than 2 percent live on *kibbutzim*.
- As of 2006, 268,379 Israelis were living in the 126 Jewish communities in Judea and Samaria. Kiryat Sefer (34,500) is the largest Jewish town in Judea and Samaria.



verse from the Torah! The situation reflected in this story is tragic from every possible perspective. It has left generations of Israelis unmoored, adrift from their own history (and thus from their own future). At the same time, it gives Orthodox Jews a sense of entitlement, as if the Torah is theirs only by inheritance—a treasure held by right, not one which must be earned and then shared—as if “*kedoshim tihiyu*” was a grant, not a challenge. It has empowered generations of Orthodox rabbis to speak as if they were God’s accountants, telling us why tsunamis, hurricanes and near-fatal strokes occur.

And yet, on my campus, which is hardly known as a bastion of Jewish traditionalism, a group of graduate stu-

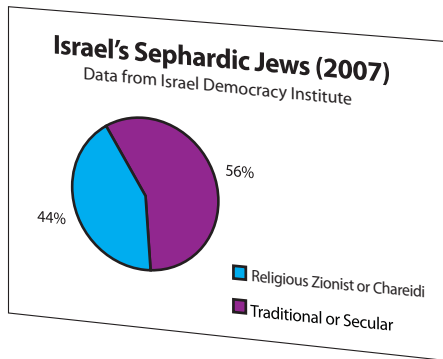
dents (none of them Orthodox, or in any “danger” of becoming so) and faculty (some Orthodox, some not) meet twice a month (at 8:30 in the morning!) to discuss Jewish texts, usually but not always that week’s *parashah*. The discussions are free-wheeling, open in ways not found in a synagogue or *beit midrash*, and, for that reason, often lead to new and unexpected insights. The students come because they see Judaism as indeed belonging to them, not just to their Orthodox neighbors, or—even worse—as belonging only to the Orthodox establishment.

And yet again, for the last nine years I have had the privilege of directing “Be-Zavta” (Aramaic for “team-work”) on my campus, a program of Judaic enrichment carried out in an atmosphere of “teaching not preaching,” which is generously funded by an Orthodox South American Jew deeply concerned about the future of the Jewish people. Each year my co-director (a former Conservative Rabbi) recruits forty of the best students at the university, few of whom are themselves observant, but all of whom think Judaism is too precious to leave to the Orthodox. Each year, when I greet the new students, I tell them my aim is that students who now eat bread on Pesach will, by the end of the year, eat *chametz* on Pesach (the rabbis who teach for us always win at that). My wife suggested that this year I tell the students that the point of the program is to provide them with hyperlinks in their minds to Jewish

“sites”—should they ever want to click on the links, the sites will be waiting. Our donor is convinced that Jewish souls, exposed to Torah taught by Orthodox rabbis, will eventually return to Torah; the

- The desire to transform a mostly barren land into a modern state was a key factor in Israel's scientific and technological development. Today, the percentage of Israelis engaged in scientific and technological inquiry, and the amount spent on research and development in relation to its GDP, are among the highest in the world.
- Israel plays an important role in the development of medical technology. Israeli scientists have developed computer tomography (CT) scanners and magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) systems, pacemakers, lasers and other life-saving devices. Israeli researchers have also made impressive contributions in the fields of cancer immunology and cardiology, as well as in brain, orthopedic and plastic surgery.
- Israel has been internationally acclaimed throughout the years for its extraordinary achievements in agriculture, irrigation and various high-tech industries and electronic start-ups. High-tech exports rose from \$3 billion in 1991 to \$12.3 billion in 2000 and to \$18.7 billion in 2005.



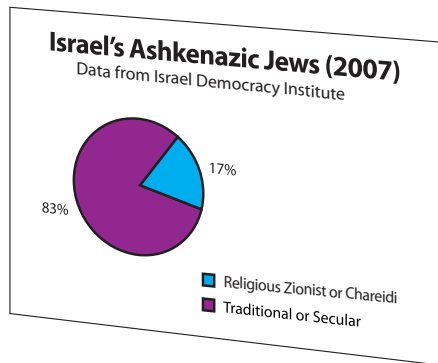


university is willing to accept his donation since, to put it mildly, it is skeptical about that expectation. Each year there are far more applicants than we can accommodate in the program—another “and yet....”

And yet once again, for four years I helped organize and staff a monthly program of Jewish text study for adults in Beit Lechem Ha-Glili, a moshav not far from Haifa. All the participants (about thirty-

five people who gave up TV for an evening every week to meet in a drafty community center and study Jewish texts) were thoroughly secular, yet like the students described above, insisted on seeing Judaism as something that belonged to them, and not just to the Orthodox. The same woman who was the driving force behind these meetings had also organized a long series of encounters between Leftist secularists (her friends) and religious settlers from the territories, among them prominent founders of Gush Emunim. My wife and I were invited to join this venture as people in the middle: Orthodox doves. Fifteen to twenty families would meet for long afternoons or whole weekends. No one's mind was changed, but those on each side came to see the others as decent human beings and concerned Jews, not as cardboard stereotypes.

This is what I can report during Israel's sixtieth year. From my vantage point, the things I have described take center-stage; all the many and varied aggravations fade into the background. Yes, Israel is a country of contrasts and contradictions, of scandals and embarrassments, of dysfunctional institutions ... and yet, and yet. While the dream—*Hatikvah*—“to be a free people in our Land,” and to be accepted as such by the world, remains only a partially-fulfilled dream, it remains a dream worth fighting for, and, especially, worth living for. **JA**



*An Israeli researcher  
Photo: Ariel Jerolimski*



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(השנה ה-67 תשס"ח) 2008

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