Final Paper

<p style="text-align:center">The Shift in Israeli Identity Towards Nationalism and a More Religious State</p>

Israel was founded in 1948 as an explicitly secular Jewish state, with a goal of being open to freedom of religion and free from prejudice. However, the founding of the state of Israel also brought waves of new Jewish immigrants, who gradually changed the organizing principle of the state and its identity. No longer purely secular, Israeli identity became increasingly tied to Orthodox religious Judaism. Privileges are offered in Israeli society to Orthodox Jews, and Jewish religion and traditions are highly valued across Israel. Even though many non-Jews live in Israel and there is no official religion of Israel, Israel is the center of Judaism across the world and its laws have grown to increasingly value Jewish religion and culture. The second aspect of current Israeli identity is a shift, especially in its government and laws, towards more right-wing nationalist ideals, including the desire to keep up settlements in Gaza and the West Bank. This identity shift was promoted especially by Israel's participation in several wars for territory following its 1948 war for independence. With the influx of a new immigrant population and continued conflicts with Arab neighbors, Israeli identity became at once increasingly Orthodox and increasingly nationalist.

Israeli independence was declared amidst the Arab-Israeli War that continued into 1949. After many European Jews had established a home in what was then British-controlled Palestine and had fought in the war for their independence, David Ben-Gurion rose to power and became Israel's first Prime Minister. From 1948 until 1963 (with one brief hiatus in 1953-55), Ben-Gurion served as the Prime Minister of Israel. Throughout Ben-Gurion's tenure, Israel was unified under a principle of Statism. The civil religion of Israel at this time was a secularized version of Judaism with the state of Israel as the central focus. Ben-Gurion focused on

establishing functioning state institutions. He was an early Zionist and envisioned Jewish unity in a secular society. Throughout this time, however, the focus on political and military agenda and identity was diminishing the value and importance of Judaism itself and Jewish culture. The heightened importance of the state during this time took priority. As more Orthodox immigrants began arriving to Israel, however, it was time for a shift away from statism and toward a society unified under Jewish culture.

The shift away from secularism and towards a society based more on Jewish religion was accompanied by a shift in the type of historical narrative that was used to unify Israeli citizens. The first generation of Israeli children were called Sabras (Rubinstein, 159), and Ben-Gurion idealized the notion of the Sabra and sought to delegitimize the Diaspora Jews, or Jews who did not live in Israel. The Sabras were initially viewed as a group only connected to each other and to Zionism and with no ties to anything non-Israeli. Since the 1980's, this cult-like notion of Sabra superiority has been replaced by a more inclusive vision of the unification of Jews everywhere.

The way the Holocaust is viewed is an example of how Israel has moved away from Statism and towards a state more focused on Judaism and Jewish culture. The Sabras and supporters of Ben-Gurion viewed Jews killed in the Holocaust as weak and representing values that went against the ideal of a strong Israeli state (Rubinstein, 164). The aspects of history that this government focused on as a political motivator were secularized stories from the Bible of the pre-exile Jews and of their exile (Liebman, 86). These stories were part of the civil religion of Israel and were not used in their traditional religious context. Ben-Gurion used the story of the exile from their homeland to bring together the Israelis under a goal of a strong state of Israel and chose not to focus on more recent history to unite his people. Now, however, the biblical stories

retain their religious significance and are not used just as symbols, and Jewish identity has taken hold as the common uniting force instead of identity with the state of Israel. Additionally, the Holocaust is now viewed as a motivation to uphold the Jewishness of Israel, and remembering the Jews killed in the Holocaust inspires Israelis to maintain their Jewish culture (Liebman, 9). In fact, Netanyahu mentions the Holocaust in nearly every speech he gives as a propaganda tactic. Jews still feel very connected to Israel, but in a different way than they did during Statism: Israelis are now invited to think of themselves increasingly as Israeli Jews rather than citizens of the state of Israel.

Under Statism, the devotion that Jewish immigrants felt to "traditional Judaism was viewed as an impediment to their reeducation in the spirit of the new Israeli culture," (Liebman, 91). As more and more immigrants began coming after the 1948 war, however, the focus on Jewish tradition and Judaism began to be more accepted. This is because the numbers of devout Jewish immigrants had grown enough to have a voice in the identity of the state of Israel. Because of increase in devout immigrants, by the time of the war in 1967 the civil religion of Israel began to grow more religious and less secular.

As this happened, Jews - especially Orthodox Jews - began receiving more special privileges in Israeli society. This began with Ben-Gurion's attempt to win the political support of Agudat Yisrael, an ultra-Orthodox Jewish political party, by granting them control in four main areas of life in Israel. Saturday was declared the national day of rest, all government kitchens were kosher, religious courts were given control of marriage and divorce, and the religious education systems that existed would be preserved (Shafir, 140-141). These four areas of control that Orthodox Jews were initially granted by Ben-Gurion spread out over all other areas of life in Israel over the years that followed. By granting AY control over four significant areas of Israeli

life, religious groups were granted significant political authority. This began to illustrate the shift from a secular society to one where religious orthodoxy began to supplant secular civic institutions.

The fact that religious courts were granted control of marriage, divorce, and funeral proceedings makes non-religious marriage and interreligious marriage not allowed in Israel. This results in more Jewish people getting to take advantage of the legal and social privileges given to married people in Israel. Making government kitchens operate in accordance with Jewish dietary rules shows that the government respects Jewish tradition and laws. Orthodox Jewish power in Israel has grown ever since, and has also been seen in the exemption of *charedi* yeshiva students from military service. This benefits the Orthodox community greatly; exempting such a large group of men from potentially risking their lives in military service shows that the government of Israel values Orthodox citizens' lives over the lives of its other citizens. Granting Orthodox Jews exceptions to many national rules and special treatment under the law reinforces the power of Judaism in the state of Israel and cements Israel's identity after Statism as, first and foremost, a Jewish state.

Israel's strong connection to Judaism has continued to grow. In July 2018, the Knesset passed a law stating that the right of national self-determination is "unique to the Jewish people," excluding any of Israel's citizens who are not Jews (Basic Law: Israel as the Nation-State of the Jewish People). Arab members of the Knesset likened this new nation-state law to apartheid and cautioned that this law promoted ideals of Jewish supremacy. Although Israel's declaration of independence says that Israel is committed to "complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex" (Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel), it is difficult to uphold these inclusive values while being a Jewish state and

catering to Jewish goals and ideals. Even without this 2018 Basic Law in place, Israel had given Jews priority by giving Orthodox Jews special privileges as discussed above and by granting Arabs fewer resources from the state of Israel than Jews, spending less on public resources and education in areas with greater Arab populations (Class Presentation), but now the superiority of and preference to Jews in Israel is official and set in law by the Knesset. According to Israeli Arab scholar Yousef T. Jabareen, "this Basic Law creates and deepens existing inequalities between Jews and Arab-Palestinians in Israel [and] clearly and definitively establishes the legal and social status of the Arab-Palestinian community in Israel as lower than that of the Jewish majority," (Rabinovitch, 250). Thus, Israel is continuing to move more towards a more religiously defined Jewish identity.

The passage of the Basic Law with its focus on building and maintaining the nation-state is also linked to a second shift in Israeli identity, a shift towards stronger nationalism. Much of the growing right-wing believes that Jews should maintain the majority in Israel, and that Arabs in Israel are a threat to the continuity of their nation-state. Through this nationalist viewpoint, peace between Israelis and Arabs is not seen as possible when Israel still has a desire to occupy and own more land. This attitude also explains why peace talks have been relatively unsuccessful. It is important to note here that many Israeli citizens are left-wing; however, the Israeli government passing nationalist laws is what is shaping the Israeli identity to be more nationalist and right-wing. Netanyahu, the prime minister, is a member of the right-wing Likud party, and the left-wing parties continue to crumble politically.

Israel's participation in the wars following the 1948 war has allowed this nationalist identity to grow immensely. In some ways, Israel has always been in a state of war because of so many conflicts occurring back to back. The first major conflict following the 1948 war was the

Six-Day War in 1967, fought with Egypt, Jordan, and Syria. In this war, Israel made substantial territorial gains, including the West Bank, Gaza Strip, Golan Heights and much of the Sinai Peninsula. The Six-Day War also led to the capture of Jerusalem. This conquest led to a heightened confidence among Israeli Jews, and the two decades following 1967 could be considered Israel's "Empire Days," (Class Presentation) when Israel occupied a lot of territory and was militarily powerful. As one can imagine, following the capture of so much territory, a national identity began to form that idealized and promoted the capture of more land. Israel's nationalist identity seeks to continue growing the Israeli Jewish state and relive as much of the growth seen in the Empire Days as possible.

The 1973 war, also known as the Yom Kippur War, contributed to the Israeli nationalist identity in a different way. This war on Israel was waged by coalition of Arab states led by Syria and Egypt. Because Israel almost lost this war, Israeli citizens felt a sense of vulnerability and anxiety that was reminiscent of what Jews felt before Israel had been established as a nation-state (Class Presentation), and this further drove the view that an ideal Israel should capture more territory and be a thriving Jewish homeland. The vulnerability felt following the Yom Kippur war led to Israelis feeling increasingly attacked because of their religious identity as Jews rather than just because they occupy land that was once occupied by Palestinians. The religious identification thus fed the conviction that Israel must arm itself and strengthen its opposition to its non-Jewish neighbors as well as non-Jews within its borders. This is also when the old civil religion began to be critiqued politically. Religious nationalism began to replace it, promoting goals similar to old Zionism but with more of a focus on religious Jewish nationalism instead of a focus on a safe refuge land. This new religious nationalism had increased focus on Jewish culture and a goal that every area under Israeli military control should be part of the Land of

Israel that was promised to Jews in the Bible. This is also why many Israelis have a strong desire to keep up the settlements that they currently occupy in the West Bank and Gaza. After Israel's participation in these wars, there was also a heightened focus on national security which fed into this newfound Jewish nationalism.

Thus we see that through Israel's influx of Jewish immigrants and through its participation in wars for territory following the 1948 war for independence, Israel's identity has become more right-wing, nationalist, and focused on Jewish religion and culture. This is not to say that this is the only Israeli identity, but it is the identity that the government is propagating. As the civil religion of Israel has become more religiously geared, the Jews in Israel have been granted more and more preferential treatment.

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