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# Searching for *Shalom Bayit*

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**T**hroughout history, the Jewish people have faced persecution, discrimination, and violence. In the twentieth century, by some act of God or luck, these oppressed people were granted a piece of land to call home. They were not given just any piece of land; they were given the Land of Israel, the land which is believed to have been given to their ancestors, the ancient Hebrews.

Over the past 60 years, the Israelis have built up this swamp-filled wasteland, turning it into a flourishing country with a booming economy.<sup>1</sup> Modern Israel is at the forefront of scientific research and advanced technological thought. It is a member of the United Nations and the only democracy in the Middle East. Despite its tiny geographical size, Israel participates in world efforts that support human rights and provide foreign humanitarian aid. Despite its establishment as a Jewish state, Israel is also home to minority groups such as Christians, Muslims, Bedouins, and Druze alike. This diversity and complexity are together both part of Israel's beauties and one of her challenges. Israel's atmosphere enables one to feel the past, while at the same time embrace the future. Yet, despite all of Israel's incredible accomplishments, there are two significant problems that this young country has not been able to resolve, two issues that seriously challenge Israel's survival. One infamous issue is the external attacks on Israel by her neighboring Arab countries, and particularly the Palestinian-Arabs who share close quarters with her. The other, lesser known, trouble – which is an equally serious problem – is an internal attack on Israel that jeopardizes her strength. This trouble is the increasing societal divide within Israel's Jewish population.

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Today, the Jewish people in the State of Israel are more polarized than ever. It is difficult to visit the modern state of Israel without feeling the tension between the secular and religious Israelis that permeates Jewish Israeli culture. Despite the immense opportunity they were given in 1948 to create a Jewish autonomous state in their ancestral homeland, the behavior and hostility between Jewish Israeli factions does not make this gift of Jewish autonomy look like an opportunity for which they are grateful. Particularly with so much hostility from her neighbors, Israel can not afford to be weak. Israeli Jews do not have the luxury to be divided, yet solidarity is absent from contemporary society in Israel, especially among the Jewish populace.

The schism between the various factions of Jews in modern Israeli society is not a new development. Rather, it is a complex issue that dates back to the Jewish Enlightenment Movement or *Tnuat HaHaskalah* of the late eighteenth century. As time has progressed, this divide has widened, and the gravity of the issue has escalated as the secular and religious factions of the Jewish contingency have polarized in opposite directions, moving further away from the more moderate and unified stance they once held. This essay will analyze the history of the divide between the secular and religious Jews in Israel, and consider the reasons behind the increasing polarization of the two groups. It will also attempt to make projections for the future and highlight measures currently being taken to ensure a united Israeli society.

As a disclaimer, it is important to note that the current Jewish Israeli majority is not composed of two distinct homogenous contingencies, but rather is made up of a diverse array of Jewish factions incorporating many diverse beliefs and persuasions. For analytical purposes, however, this paper simplifies the factions by grouping them into two main bodies – secular and religious. These were the two original groups that emerged from the first schism in Jewish society. In order to simplify this complex issue, the two polar groups are described here in generalities and in terms of their most extreme contingencies, a description that does not represent everyone who might identify himself with

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that faction.

It is also important to note that, for simplicity's sake, when "Israel's society" is written in this essay, it refers specifically to the Jewish society in Israel and not the entire populous that includes non-Jewish Israeli minorities. When "secular," "religious," "secular Israelis," or "religious Israelis" are written, these too refer only to the distinctions made within the Jewish populace.

### ***Haskalah*: The Initial Schism**

This complex issue is cluttered with layers of historical disputes and intricate technicalities; both sides of the divide have faltered and been victimized by the other party at some point during this endless struggle. Tracking the evolution of the separate secular and religious Jewish cultures helps explain how this divide began and developed.

The dispute between the secular and religious Jews is by no means a recent development. It is specifically rooted in *Tnuat HaHaskalah*, which began in 1770. The *Haskalah* was inspired by the European Enlightenment, but had a Jewish character. Literally, *Haskalah* comes from the Hebrew word *sekhel*, meaning "reason" or "intellect." This intellectual movement, based on rationality, attempted to solve "the Jewish problem," which refers to the struggle of the Jews to live and survive in a world filled with anti-Semitism.<sup>2</sup> It was an antireligious and pro-assimilation movement dictating that Jews must assimilate into the cultures and societies of their European countries of residence by speaking the native languages, expressing loyalty to the governments, and dressing and acting like their non-Jewish neighbors in order to extinguish the flourishing anti-Semitism. The movement encouraged Jews to abandon their constant study of Jewish texts and to instead study secular disciplines, learn the European and Hebrew languages, and enter fields in agriculture, the arts and the sciences.<sup>3</sup> The movement embraced modernity and opposed the Ultra-Orthodox and Chasidic ways of life, leaving some religious Jews torn between the secular and religious worlds. These Jews tried to balance *halakha*, traditional

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Jewish law, with the secular world. Through the insight of Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch, this group eventually formed Modern Orthodoxy, a movement that sought to combine the virtues of secular and religious Judaism.

The *Haskalah* was the first Jewish movement to break away from the Jewish religious status quo. Prior to the *Haskalah*, there were always some Jews who were not as religiously observant as others, but the *Haskalah* was the first established movement that abandoned the insular Jewish community. The *maskilim* (followers of the *Haskalah*) were disgusted by religious Jews. Their negative attitudes were confirmed when they witnessed the Orthodox Jews living in Jerusalem. They saw these Jews as poor, uneducated, superstitious, cowardly, zealous, lacking self-respect, and living on charitable funds from Diaspora Jews. They found this religious Jerusalemite community repulsive, a reflection of the Jewish religion that they chose to abandon.<sup>4</sup>

This intellectual movement caused the internal schism within the Jewish people that is reflected today in modern Israeli society. When the *maskilim* learned that their practiced rationality was not enough to extinguish the fierce anti-Semitism present worldwide, they sought to find another solution. The *Haskalah*'s stimulus subsequently influenced later breakaway movements such as Reform Judaism and Zionism in particular. Initially, Zionism was created as a new alternative movement that contained the same hopes of the *Haskalah*: to enable Jews to fit in with the secular world.

### **What Zionism Promised that the *Haskalah* Could Not**

Zionism began as a secular and political movement that, like the *Haskalah*, sought to solve the “Jewish problem.” According to Zionist doctrine, the *Haskalah* failed in its attempt because “personal emancipation and equality were impossible without national emancipation and equality, since national problems require national solutions.”<sup>5</sup> Zionism differed from the *Haskalah* by offering the solution of the establishment of a national Jewish state in the historical Jewish homeland, composed of a Jewish majority. This solution realized the Jewish

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people's right to self-determination and autonomy. Furthermore, Zionists argued that in order to become an equal member of the family of nations, they must attain sovereignty.

The man most famous for recognizing this reality was Theodore Herzl (1860-1904), a Budapest native who is also known as the father of modern political Zionism. Herzl was the epitome of the Enlightened Jew. Educated in the spirit of the German-Jewish Enlightenment, Herzl learned to appreciate secular culture and was a pure product of the *Haskalah*.<sup>6</sup> With this Enlightenment influence, Herzl went on to found political Zionism, synthesizing together liberation and unity, the two key goals of liberal nationalism. Zionism aimed to free the Jews from hostile and oppressive alien rule; it sought to gather the Jewish exiles from the four corners of the world in an effort to reestablish Jewish unity in the Jewish homeland.<sup>7</sup>

As a reporter for an Austrian newspaper, Herzl covered the Dreyfus affair, the infamous and unfounded accusation of treason of a Jewish French officer. Here, Herzl learned the extent of the “Jewish problem” and initiated the development of Zionism, energizing the new group and consolidating it into a political movement. He launched the Jewish people into world politics and, for the first time, focused global attention on the “Jewish problem.”

Zionism was born through the insight and guidance of enlightened, secular Jews like Herzl and soon grew to include diverse groups, from socialist to religious Jews. While the Zionist factions multiplied and evolved, the greater movement still remained unified as all parties worked together towards a common goal: a national Jewish homeland. In 1948, this goal was accomplished with the establishment of the State of Israel.<sup>8</sup>

Despite Zionism's claim to be a secular movement, it regarded Palestine, the ancestral and religious homeland of the Jews, as the only solution to “the Jewish problem,” refusing other offers such as Uganda. This belief signifies that religion and messianism were both woven into this apparently secular political movement. This idea is best put by Israeli historian Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin:

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“The Secular did not believe in God, yet cited Him as promising the land of Israel to the Jewish people.”<sup>9</sup> This approach epitomized the attitude of the secular Zionists, who never let go of the Bible as their claim to the Land of Israel. Paradoxically, while these secular Zionists casually mixed religion together with their political debate and nationalistic theories, the early religious Zionists were also the ones to make the distinction between “holy and profane,” or religious and secular. The ambivalent attitude of the early secular Jews to religion is responsible for much of the confusion inherent in the “Jewish identity” of Israeli society today.

### **Rethinking Tradition: From Exile in Europe to Autonomy in Israel**

**W**hile the implementation of religion by the secular Zionists seems odd, it is better understood after looking at the role religion and tradition played in the lives of these Jews. Over centuries in the Diaspora, religion and tradition were the means for Jews to manifest their yearning for a return to Zion. Through practice of rituals and study of texts, the Jewish people maintained a strong and unique relationship with their historical homeland.<sup>10</sup>

While tradition and ritual maintained the secular Zionists’ attachment, connection, and yearning for Israel when they lived in Exile, once in Israel, they no longer had a need to practice these traditions. Soon after immigrating they dropped their religious practices. According to historian Anita Shapira, this letting go of observance happened because it was hard for these *olim* (immigrants to the land of Israel) to be religious in Palestine’s unique environment. These secular Zionists were not anti-religion, but were rather ambivalent towards Judaism. While some consider their behavior rebellious, it is clear they did not rebel out of spite.<sup>11</sup>

Most secular Zionists came to Israel from Europe as Jews educated in their heritage. Despite their newly expressed non-observant lifestyles, “Jewish outlooks” and traditions were greatly ingrained in the mentalities of these *olim* as a result of their traditional upbringings. There were some religious practices

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that these secular Zionist *olim* considered fanatical and refused to integrate into the new pre-Israeli culture (like *Shmita* observance – a sabbatical every seven years that involves numerous restrictions such as not working the land). Yet at the same time, there were other observances that they did not think twice about incorporating (like Shabbat and *Kashrut* – maintaining Jewish dietary laws – observance), even though they did not necessarily observe these rituals themselves.<sup>12</sup> While this inconsistency is initially difficult to understand, on closer examination some rationale can be deciphered. *Kashrut* and Shabbat observance were, to these *olim*, familiar practices that were common to Diaspora Jewish lifestyle. *Shmita*, however, is a practice whose observance is specific to the land of Israel. *Halakha* does not require its observance outside of Israel. Consequently, it was not a feature of Diaspora Jewish life. Secular Zionism considered it fanatical and refused to integrate it into the new Israeli culture because it was foreign to their understanding of common Jewish practice. This further illustrates that while secular Zionism looked to a secular Jewish future in the Land of Israel, their Jewish ritual life was rooted in the past of the Diaspora.

The Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel illustrates a common Zionist idea at the time of establishment. This Zionist idea, despite being of the secular Zionist origin, makes assumptions that are clearly religious in their foundation. This document states:

The Land of Israel (*Eretz Yisrael*) was the birthplace of the Jewish people. Here their spiritual, religious and political identity was shaped. Here they first attained to statehood, created cultural values of national and universal significance and gave to the world the eternal Book of Books. After being forcibly Exiled from their land, the people kept faith with it throughout their Dispersion and never ceased to pray and hope for their return to it and for the restoration in it of their political freedom.<sup>1</sup>

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References to the land as “*Eretz Yisrael*” (the land of Israel) and “the birthplace of the Jewish people,” as well as comments that the Jews “gave to the world the eternal Book of Books [the Bible]” are all statements with embedded religious faith. These are not thoughts associated with secularism, yet they epitomize secular Zionism of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Paradoxically, the central idea of secular Zionism is the concept that the Land of Israel is the historical birthplace of the Jewish people, a claim which dates back 4,000 years to Abraham, the first forefather, as well as the belief that Jewish life outside of Israel is a life of Exile.

This religious doctrine of secular Zionism is unlike the ideology of modern secular Zionists living in Israel, who would probably not make such a proclamation today. The shift in the attitude of this faction of Zionism is just one element that explains the increased divide in modern-day Israeli society.

### **Working Together For a Common Goal**

While even at the time of the establishment of the State of Israel the various Zionist groups did not maintain the same position on many issues, they managed to achieve a unified stance much more often than they do today. The ambivalence of the secular Zionists towards religion allowed them to better unite with the religious Zionists in the past. An example of this relationship is the social contract that they established at the top of the government, otherwise known as the “status quo agreement” or “the Agreement.” About 11 months before the signing of the Declaration of Independence of the Establishment of Israel, this agreement was passed in order to “table” religious issues for the time being, so that governmental leaders could focus on more important issues that Israel faced as a new country. With the guidance of David Ben-Gurion, this agreement was established in response to concerns of the Agudath Israel World Organization pertaining to specific governmental religious observances such as Shabbat, *kashrut*, marriage, divorce, and conversion. As a “typical secular Zionist” who was not observant himself but appreciated his Jewish

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heritage, Ben-Gurion wanted to ensure participation from the religious and secular alike in the establishment of the State of Israel. The Agreement was created in response to discussions of this participation and “the Jewish Agency gave its solemn assurance that ‘everything possible will be done’ to ‘avoid, Heaven forbid, the splitting of the House of Israel into two.’”<sup>14</sup> Whatever the reasoning, however, this arrangement was made by the various Jewish factions upon Israel’s establishment.

This strong language is proof of the lengths taken in order to ensure unity of the Jewish people and guarantee every type of Jew the right to participate in this exciting moment in history. While the very establishment of this agreement is evidence that these two Zionist parties did not necessarily agree on the topic of religion, it is still a significant accomplishment for a number of reasons. Firstly, this case shows that the two groups had the maturity and foresight to set aside their differences on the subject of religion in order to deal with other pressing issues and remain united, which is quite monumental. Secondly, the fact that these two parties were even *able* to agree to pass anything with regards to religion in the government is impressive. Thirdly, the fact that both the secular and religious Zionist parties involved in this arrangement agreed on a religious “status quo” and chose to implement this “status quo” into their government is highly noteworthy. This common outlook is indicative of the collective religious norms at that time. For example, at the time of the agreement, secular Zionists had a stronger connection to their Jewish heritage than they do today. The “status quo agreement” might not have been a conscious implementation of religion into the government on the part of the early secular Zionists since they did not think of the role religion played in their lives. Rather, certain religious rituals were an intrinsic part of their lives and consequently, they did not make a distinction between these religious and secular aspects. In a sense, it could be argued by today’s secular Zionists that, while those religious aspects were part of secular life in the past, they are outdated and no longer a part of secular Zionist culture or belief.

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When early Israeli society is compared to the contemporary one, a remarkable difference begins to take shape. The divide between the secular and the religious has significantly widened over the past few decades. It is apparent that in the past, these two groups respected one another and were able to see eye to eye. At that time, the secular Zionists accepted this “status quo agreement” and, in the Declaration of Independence, defined Israel as a “Jewish” state. Many of the religious Zionists saw the agreement as a condition fundamental to the character of the State of Israel at her inception. The secular and religious groups were different, but not alien to one another. Today, with increasing division and diverging extremes, the Jewish majority of Israeli society is splintered; a gaping divide exists between its two poles.

### **Today’s Frightening Reality**

**T**oday, the agreement has broken down and is in great need of repair. What was considered the “status quo” with regards to religious practices in 1947 is no longer the societal norm in Israel. Truthfully, there is no single Jewish societal norm with regards to specific religious practice. The Israeli courts are now facing questions such as “Who is a Jew?” and “Does governmental Shabbat observance need to be *halakhic*?” in order to answer questions about conversion and the operation of public transportation and businesses on Shabbat. By slicing away at what was once agreed upon by both the secular and religious Zionists, the initially defined “Jewish” component of the state is changing, but neither group feels confident with the democratic method used in creating this legal reform. The band-aid they put on the issue decades ago has fallen off, and there is not yet a realistic resolution to replace this long outdated temporary fix.<sup>15</sup>

This erosion in the system follows the pattern of change in Israeli society’s makeup over the past 60 years. Just as, generally speaking, the secular have moved toward the left and become “more secular,” the religious have moved toward the right and become more stringent and less open to the secularisms of

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society. The rigidity of the religious (because of strict adherence to Jewish law) makes compromise difficult, and their stance on religion remains unwavering. Whereas decades ago both groups were more moderate in their views and could see eye to eye, today the secular and religious groups have polarized into societal factions that are alien to one another. Additionally, various new Jewish factions have emerged in Israel, further dividing the society.

A social survey conducted by the Central Bureau of Statistics in the years 2002 to 2004 showed that, of Israelis over the age of 20, eight percent characterize themselves as Ultra-Orthodox, nine percent characterize themselves as Modern Orthodox, 12 percent as traditionally observant, 27 percent as traditional and 44 percent as secular. This data can be read either as the religious being comprised of Ultra-Orthodox, Modern Orthodox, traditionally observant, and traditional, yielding a total of 56 percent, or as the religious being comprised of Ultra-Orthodox, Modern Orthodox, and traditionally observant, yielding a total of 29 percent. In this essay, the data is analyzed using the latter grouping. This method of grouping diversifies the secular contingency by incorporating a group that identifies itself as traditional and thereby counters the religious grouping of self-identifying observant Jews.<sup>16</sup>

This data shows that while Zionism began as a secular movement, the religious sector has established itself in Israeli society over the past few decades. Israel's religious population has grown, and therefore it would seem that they currently have a bigger influence than they used to on governmental issues. However, rather than remaining moderate and practicing compromise and tolerance, both the religious and secular groups have become more entrenched in their beliefs and have gone to opposite extremes, the secular becoming increasingly secular and the religious increasingly religious. Despite the religious party's growth, the sector of the Jewish population that identifies itself as secular is still the majority, totaling 71 percent. A logical question would be: why is this a bigger problem today than it was in the past if today there are proportionally fewer secular Israelis and more observant members of

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Israeli society than there were then? Seemingly, now that observant Jews have a larger presence among their secular brothers, running the country in a *halakhic* manner would be less problematic.

However, this is not the case. The polarization of secular and religious Jews has contributed to a split in Israeli society. This split makes it even more difficult for the groups to identify with one another. Whereas the founding secular Zionists were knowledgeable about Jewish law and practice, much of the present generation is more removed from their religious Jewish roots and are consequently less knowledgeable about their heritage. Similarly, many of today's religious Israelis do not mirror their predecessors. Some of the religious have moved further towards the right and no longer identify with mainstream Zionism, while others are just generally less aware of the other Zionist factions' principles and sensitivities.

Plato wrote, "Ignorance, [is] the root and the stem of every evil."<sup>17</sup> The societal gap is maintained and perpetuated by intolerance and ignorance within both societal groupings. The secular Jews of Israel are less informed when it comes to knowledge of Jewish law, texts, observance, and history. While the governmental education system had previously educated secular and religious Israeli Jews in the Bible, nowadays the secular school system is less demanding in this subject. The traditional secular Israelis might fast on Yom Kippur or have a Passover *Seder*, but they might do so more out of habit and less out of an understanding of the significance of these ancient practices. The secular Israelis who are "completely non-observant" do not participate in these common practices at all and may know little to nothing about them. Observant society, on the other hand, emphasizes strong religious education and stringent adherence to religious practices. Secular society has little chance to understand its religious counterparts and the practices that they so devoutly uphold. Furthermore, some secular Israelis often resent the religious Jews for forcing their beliefs and practices on the country. This resentment may come from a lack of knowledge of the secular origin of religion's implementation into

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Israeli law, a lack of understanding as to the reason the religious contingency believes it necessary for the Jewish state to conduct itself according to Jewish law and tradition, or a lack of appreciation for the significance of these practices.

In this case, the ignorance of the secular Israelis – in terms of a lack of knowledge of their Jewish heritage and past – creates a barrier between them and their secular forefathers who did not have this handicap. The parents of this secular generation were more knowledgeable about their Jewish heritage and background. While they considered themselves secular, most grew up in observant homes. They had an ambivalent attitude towards religion, but nevertheless maintained a rich knowledge of their past. The Bible, as the source book even for secular Zionism, was taught in all schools in early Israel, and the first few generations knew this text comprehensively. What separated them from the religious Zionists was the Oral Law (the oral tradition believed by religious Jews to have been received together with the written Torah). While the secular Zionists were antagonistic to the Oral Law, the Bible was their source of proof for rights to the Land of Israel despite their sometimes atheistic leanings.

For members of this generation, incorporating religion into their society and government was quite natural; it did not bother them the way it bothers their children because they had a connection to it through their traditional European upbringing. Their children, however, are less versed in the Bible. They do not learn it in school, nor do they have the same traditional past of earlier secular Zionists and Israelis. As a result of this unfamiliarity with tradition, these secular Israelis are often understandably bitter towards the religious. They blame the religious for acts that they did not solely commit, such as implementing religion into Israeli society and government. Their secular forefathers were more moderate, and they mutually assumed the inclusion of religion in the government without making a distinction between “holy” (or religious), and “profane” (or secular).

The other group that must be analyzed is the religious, or observant, sector of Israeli society. In general, over the second half of the twentieth century,

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the observant Jewish community has gravitated towards more devout and strict religious observance, becoming even more observant and knowledgeable in Torah law than their ancestors. The observant community in Israel is no exception to this trend. With more religious Jews receiving a solid, text-based religious education, Jewish observance is being more strictly adhered to by the religious, and the observant community is leaning to the right. While the religious community is becoming more versed in their Jewish heritage and is often less open to secular ideals, the secular community is shifting towards the left, becoming more liberal and less versed in its Jewish heritage. As a result of the societal sectors' contrary dogmatic views and unfortunate lack of tolerance, the gap between them has significantly widened and the tension between them has multiplied.

Ugly stereotypes define each group's perception of "the other." These stereotypes tend to be rooted in fears and animosity that originate from rumors, myths, or one-time cases rather than real, first-person relationships and encounters between the two groups. Secular Jews fear Israel will become dominated by religious extremism as a result of the influence of the Orthodox Jews. The religious Israelis, on the other hand, see the anti-religious influence on Israeli society as destructive and blame this on the secular Jews. They see Jews who do not follow a Torah lifestyle as "at risk" religiously. They resent the secular for not only desecrating their own *neshamot* (Jewish souls), but also for polluting the holy environment of the Land of Israel with their supposedly immoral practices. These religious Jews are genuinely terrified of the influence the secular Israelis have on the religious growth of their young children, just as the secular Jews feel patronized and stifled by the imposed religious constraints.<sup>18</sup> These fears and sentiments, based on misconceptions and some exaggerated truths, illustrate the lack of true interaction between the secular and religious Israelis. True interaction is what often fosters tolerance and understanding.

This sad reality – two groups hating each other without really understanding one another – is a sign of ignorance and lack of tolerance in each

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of them. Generally, they are ignorant of “the other,” and this ignorance further perpetuates the problem. Plato continued his thoughts on ignorance by writing, “The only good is knowledge and the only evil is ignorance.”<sup>19</sup> The overall ignorance of both the secular and the religious in their understanding of each other is what intensifies the damage and harm caused by this societal division. Generally speaking, many of the secular and religious groups bitterly hate one another, even in situations where individuals have never personally encountered “the other.” Often, they lack sensitivity and respect for the other group’s beliefs and philosophies, and build cruel stereotypical pictures of one another in their minds, using these over-the-top, often unfounded misconceptions as a means of judging one another before ever meeting. This ignorant, prejudiced behavior makes it exceedingly difficult for these groups to see eye to eye and unite as one Jewish people.

### **Recognizing the Problem and Looking to the Future**

**T**he aforementioned study brought to light a striking finding with regard to a generational split in attitudes and political stance. As has been illustrated, the secular Zionists and Israelis have become increasingly liberal and the religious increasingly religious since the establishment of Israel. According to the study, however, the new generation of Israeli youth is much more conservative than their parents’ generation. Additionally, new liberal religious factions are developing. With a more conservative secular approach and a more liberal religious outlook, the polarization of Israeli society may be yielding and possibly reversing. This new reality of Israeli society returning to its initial moderate climate could be very helpful in achieving a solution by narrowing the divide – and eventually bridging – the societal gap.

An important step in solving any problem is acknowledging that there is a problem. Two-thirds of the polled Jewish population of Israel feel that there is a problem and that it is quite serious. They feel that it is one of the most serious problems facing Israel, second only to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.<sup>20</sup>

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Some in fact feel that it is a larger threat. A societal divide this large threatens the strength and stability of a nation from within. A nation that cannot unite itself is vulnerable and weak to external threats. If the Jews of Israel cannot foster internal peace, it will be difficult for them to cultivate peace with their hostile neighbors.

There is a principle in Judaism referred to as *Shalom Bayit*, a Hebrew term meaning “peace [at] home.” This philosophy is founded on understanding the value of “peace at home” with regards to a healthy marital relationship and maintains that care for this relationship is a top priority. Jewish law, therefore, allows for *halakhic* leniencies in order to accommodate and maintain this delicate bond. This concept dictates good practices that can be applied to other areas of life. *Shalom Bayit* can particularly be understood with regards to the relationships within the greater Israeli Jewish community, which is not a united community today. It is imperative to realize the importance of a united Jewish community in general, and particularly “at home” in the Land of Israel. In attending to a priority like the relationship between the secular and religious Israelis, compromise must be exercised in order to establish tolerance and maintain peace. *Shalom Bayit* is a necessary priority that must be attained. Once factions of Jewish society in Israel establish a healthy, peaceful relationship, they will be better equipped to unite with the minorities within its borders. As a strong society, Israel will be able to create peace with her neighbors. Hopefully, with recognition of the problem, steps can be taken to find a solution and create “peace at home” in Israel, the Jewish homeland.

The heart of the problem, which creates the divide between the secular and the religious Jewish Israelis, is the role of religion in government. Despite the history, disputes exist over who is to blame for initiating this interwoven system between religion and democracy. However, all parties would agree that religion is at the root of what causes them to clash so bitterly with one another. Currently, Orthodox, or *halakhic*, Judaism controls issues pertaining to freedom of religion and ethics. When asked about their feelings regarding

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religion's role in government, one-third of the Jewish Israeli population stated, quite conservatively, that they wish to leave the situation as it currently is. On the other hand, the other two-thirds of the Jewish Israeli population, the more liberal and progressive group, wish to see Israel change this system by altering the laws that pertain to religious issues. This recognition and proactive attitude is promising and demonstrates the possibility of finding a solution.

### **Working Towards *Shalom Bayit***

**T**he need to bridge the gap has been widely recognized. Despite the ugliness of the current situation, individuals have begun to take on the challenge of uniting Israeli society. Because of the severity of the situation, educators, professionals, and lay citizens are working together to take initiative in bridging the gap between secular and religious Israelis.

Proactive efforts were taken as early as the 1960s. Just one of these small groups, labeled as the “Return to Jewish Books” by author Chaim Be’er, consisted primarily of secular Israelis who “called for reclaiming Jewish sources and returning them to the secular community as its cultural heritage. They suggested the addition of more experiential learning methods, and encouraged new Jewish expression in the arts, theater and poetry.”<sup>21</sup> While this group and other early activists had little impact on the general public at this early stage, it is important to note their efforts. The “Return to Jewish Books” group, affiliated with the Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, witnessed considerable growth right before the turn of the twenty-first century.<sup>22</sup>

Today, there are a number of organizations founded in the hopes of closing the divide and alleviating the tension between the two sectors of the Jewish population. *Gesher* (an organization whose name means “bridge” in Hebrew), claims to be “Israel’s oldest and largest educational organization dedicated to bridging the gap between different segments of the population in Israel.” *Gesher* reaches 70,000 people a year through its programs that target all age and social groups, from university students, to Army officials, to the general

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public. “By promoting mutual understanding, respect, and tolerance among Israelis of all backgrounds, *Gesher* helps Israelis develop a Jewish-Israeli identity that honors the plurality of expressions and strengthens Israel as a Jewish and democratic state.”<sup>23</sup>

The Israel Religious Action Center (IRAC), part of the Israel Movement for Progressive Judaism, works “for human equality, social justice [and] religious tolerance on the basis of progressive Judaism and democracy.”<sup>24</sup> *Am Yisrael Echad* (an organization whose name means “the nation of Israel is one” in Hebrew) works to bridge the gap by helping secular Israeli children and teens “connect to their Jewish roots and understand their heritage.” This group strives to create a strong future for Israel by emphasizing the Jewish identity that the secular and religious Israelis share.<sup>25</sup>

Academically, there is a group of psychologists, educators and rabbis called the “Common Denominator” who come together from diverse religious, social and political backgrounds in order to develop and implement a new curriculum in Israeli high schools. This curriculum aims at developing the motivation and skills needed for a respectful and caring Jewish society that will work together for a better Israel.<sup>26</sup>

*Ushpizin*, an Israeli movie directed by Gidi Dar in 2004, is the first film starring an Ultra-Orthodox Jew and was written and directed through the collaboration of secular and religious Jews in Israel. This film was made to appeal to both the religious and secular audiences as part of a creative effort to help solve the societal problem at hand in Israel today. Its success provides hope of pursuing a solution and achieving tolerance through other artistic media.<sup>27</sup>

These are just some examples of the organizations and programs aimed at creating a unified Israeli society. These methods of education, religious tolerance, and compromise initiatives are significant because they courageously take the difficult but necessary steps that follow simple recognition of the problem. In an effort to close the divide initiated by the *Haskalah* in Europe a few centuries ago and to alleviate the tension that has arisen as a result of the mutual

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ignorance between secular and religious Israelis today, these organizations work hard to implement positive, progressive steps crucial in establishing *Shalom Bayit*. With *Shalom Bayit* established and maintained in the State of Israel, the country will be strengthened, will be able to face external problems, and will be able to achieve a better, safer, and more peaceful future.

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### Notes

- 1 John Loeffler, "The middle east word war," *NewWithViews.com*, 11 April 2002 <<http://www.newswithviews.com/loeffler/loeffler3.htm>>.
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