

You must have heard about the Da Vinci Code, you likely know about the DNA Code, today you'll learn about a new Code: The Israeli Code. This is the title of a very recently published book by Prof. Gad Yair. He is the head of the Sociology and Anthropology Department at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. His field of research is that of interpreting the cultural code behind the social and philosophical discourse, literature and cinema of nations such as the United States, Germany and France. This time and for the first time Prof. Yair offers a self-examination of daily life in Israel and the Israelis who make it what it is. The book is deliberately written in popular simple Hebrew rather than the "King Language" of academic literature.

I offer this summary to those who are interested in understanding why Israelis behave and, for that manner misbehave, in the manner they do. Why and how did Israelis acquire their reputation of being loud, assertive to the point of abrasiveness, full of themselves, disrespectful of others, lacking in manners and all the rest of the attributes associated with the Israeli stereotype. It also exposes some unique and many times under-appreciated good sides of Israelis. This book is especially appealing as a guideline to non-Israelis visiting Israel and observing the "natives" do their thing. They do not have to like it necessarily but it helps to understand it and makes the stay in Israel so much more enjoyable. To Israelis it acts as a mirror. Whereas Israelis generally are not overly sensitive as to how they project themselves to others, it may be helpful for them to know how they are perceived by all the "others".

The book offers a set of 10 tenets (think of the 10 commandments) that govern the "native Israeli". They are all based on the thesis of the trauma and post-traumatic nature of the "Israeli Project".

### **The 1<sup>st</sup> 'Commandment': Thou shalt be worried sick all the time.**

In no other country in the world do people wake up every morning with the thought that their nation may not be there in a few years, a few decade or maybe just a few weeks. The feeling derived from the history of the Jewish people culminating with the Holocaust and continuing through all the Israeli wars, terrorist attacks and constant threats by its surrounding enemies and their global allies, who are bent on its destruction. The awareness of the constant existential threat to Israel forces Israelis to wake up every morning with the resolve to be strong and powerful in deterring their challengers and suppressing that feeling of fear that is constantly on their mind. This may explain why Israelis act in such a self-assured manner (to mask that constant fear) and why Israeli values place such a premium on self-sufficiency, independence, denouncing outside challenges or criticism. There is this feeling that "everybody is against us" it's been our history it is our destiny so we trust no one but ourselves. Our mindset tells us that if we will not be strong, if we will not be aggressive "they" will kill us. We have no place to go or anybody to turn to, so we have no choice to kill or be killed. Our history, from the Pharaohs to the Romans to the Spanish, to the Czars, to the Nazis to the Arabs, to the Hezbollah and the Hamas and now to the Ahmadinejad's of the world, just reinforces our paranoia.

### **The 2<sup>nd</sup> Commandment: Thou shalt not bend thy head to the demands of others.**

"Davka" a Hebrew term meaning defiance or insubordination, is part of the Israeli Code. This may explain why Israelis think, speak and behave in ways that others perceive as loud, assertive if not aggressive and chauvinistic. This commandment exposes two Israeli characteristics "standing proud"

and “taking no bull” (Hutzpah). This is an antidote to the image and destiny of the exilic Jew and the Israeli vow of “Never Again”. This constant feeling that others who do not necessarily embrace our interests try to tell us what we should do, frequently gets Israel in trouble diplomatically, politically and on a personal level socially. It’s our siege mentality that drives our resentment to outside “advice” never mind instruction. As a result Israelis have chronic trouble listening or empathizing with the views of the “other side”. We walk around with the sense that we are the chosen, we are the “special ones”, we are the righteous and nobody is going to tell us differently. Who?, Europeans? What about their anti-Semitism? Who, Americans? We saw what they did to the Indians and the blacks. Who, Turks? We know what they did to the Armenians, and so it goes.

This notion of defiance is deeply rooted in our psyche. Refusing to take orders, defying authority, challenging norms makes us feel good. It gives us a sense of freedom and liberty.

### **The 3<sup>rd</sup> Commandment: Thou shalt own the Land**

This right of ownership manifests itself. One foreign student interviewed for this book said it best: “They accentuate their presence. They do not wait for others to engage with them or give them their rights, they simply take over and take “it”. No manners, no patience, no tolerance, no consideration.” This is not only commentary on the national psyche. This sense of ownership extends to individual behavior and to intra-Israeli relationships. “My father built this road so I can drive on it anyway I feel like, who is to tell me differently?” Israelis do not highly respect the public space and the rights of other to share in it. Be it a restaurant, a bus a train a theater or a park. I am here and for as long as I am here it is all about me. I can make noise, I can talk on the phone or let it ring in the theater, I can have the best seat even if it’s not my designated one. I am here and I own the place. The same goes for public discourse as well as the media. I have something to say even if it’s not relevant, I must be heard whenever I feel the need to be heard, I don’t need confirmation of my opinions, I know I am right and I’ll cut you off in mid-sentence to let you know. I know that others may be trying to do the same at the same time but watch me I can speak louder than any of them. Of course Israelis are everywhere in the world. Next to Germans (I think) Israelis are the most travelled of all nations. Our sense of ownership extends globally, we feel at home everywhere and damn the rules and regulations the norms and the standards we are from Israel. In our history we never owned anything, we never belonged anywhere but now we are here and we own this place so get out of our way – here we come World.

### **The 4<sup>th</sup> Commandment: Thou shalt give and Thou shalt take.**

Israelis have this constant fight with the state and its authorities. We constantly complaint that we, who gave so much to this state through our sacrifices, our military service, fighting in wars etc., are not getting a fair shake. Where is no social justice? Where is the promised peace? Why are state services so poor? If nothing is being done about it I am packing my bags and leave the country, “threaten” Israelis, next time I get a call for reserve duty, watch me I am not going! ... and oh, by the way, this state for which I made all these sacrifices owes me. If I am stuck on the top of the highest mountain because I went off the designated trail, I expect my state to come and rescue me. If I am caught violating a host country laws I expect my country to bail me out. Yes, in Paraguay or India or Antarctica. They owe me.

And, believe it or not the country does. The special unit of the Foreign Ministry responsible for assisting Israelis abroad in distress (or anything that an Israeli at any point in time, anywhere in the world deems to be distressed) is the most active of all its peers if they actually are available in other countries. This is the deal we signed on: we give to the state – the state has the obligation to reciprocate. Israelis have an ambivalent relationship with their state. They will be quick to criticize every facet of the state and its institutions but will be hyper patriotic and instantly united on state celebrations and commemorations and during political, diplomatic or military crisis. The sense of Patriotism is centric in Israelis lives.

**The 5<sup>th</sup> Commandment: Thou Shalt Not Be a “Fryer”** (best translated to English as “Sucker” or “Loser”)

The need to not be perceived as a Fryer is a supreme consideration driving Israelis conduct. This requires an explanation of what is “not being a Fryer” really means and how does it affect Israeli conduct. The Israeli consumer will not tolerate anybody getting a better deal than himself on any transaction, purchase investment etc., or else he/she will feel humiliated and feel like they are a Fryer. To that end they look left and right all the time to find out what others have, what others purchased, how much they paid for it, who do they know, where did they go... and the way to find out – Just asked them, stick your nose in and pry into their business. When Israelis travel abroad they are twice as sensitive to the possibility of being taken by anybody. We are not Fryers. We behave as if everybody is out to get us (Post Traumatic Paranoia?) and we are dead set and determined not to let it happen. “200 bucks, you must be kidding, my friend just got it for 150. What do you take me for? a Fryer? It’s not about the money. Israelis are not a stingy bunch, not at all. It’s all about not being a Fryer. Israelis are reluctant to learn from others experiences, knowledge or expertise unless they are true “celebrities” in their field. They definitely do not appreciate learning from other Israelis and most definitely Israeli expatriates. You see, Israelis do not view learning from others as “value add” rather as “their own value decrease” that may render them – god forbid – Fryers. You mean to say that you know more than I do in my field of endeavor? Than what does it make me: A Fryer!

**The 6<sup>th</sup> Commandment: Thou “Speaketh” therefore Thou Exist**

Everyone has something to say. I think thus I exist. I say therefore you are wrong. The constant battle of opinions and the constant wars of ideas are a popular Israeli sport. We are compelled to hear ourselves speak for fear that keeping quiet may project timidity and subordination. (the exilic Jew?.) Listening may be, God forbid misinterpreted as an agreement or a tacit approval of the other’s point of view. That’s why Israeli talk so much, shout if they have to but have no time for listening. The culture of debate in Israel and amongst Israelis is quite simple: “I am speaking. I know that I am right. I am not willing to be challenged and I will shout over anyone who plans to do so. How do I know that I am right? Trust me I have it on good authority no need for facts or substantiations – trust me! The constant battle of opinions like in all wars originates in fear. Fear of de-legitimization, fear of not being able to justify your position, fear of rejection. We are opinionated to say the least. We have to be so opinionated or otherwise we may be perceived as followers rather than leaders and God forbid even Fryers. Israelis do not need research, scientific proof or academic methodological discipline to know that they are right. Paradoxically we learn from childhood and promote critical thinking and analytical skills, and so we teach our children. But at the end of the day our gut and the need to be proven right is what drives our

discourse. That” why Israelis are so uncomfortable in the company of “others” where “others” does not only mean gentiles it may very well be “our own” but different than ourselves, ethnically, religiously, socially. Some say that sometime it borders on Racism and who am I to disagree.

### **The 7<sup>th</sup> Commandment: Thou shalt not plan, organize or be disciplined, Thou shalt only improvise**

Jewish history may be at the source of this tenet. We were driven out of Egypt, we had to pack up and leave in a hurry, no time for planning. There are many other events in our history that compelled us to improvise, be flexible and agile like in '48 and we survived didn't we? Israelis are convinced that planning and organization is of little use in the dynamic and volatile environment we live in. Trust me it's going to be O.K. It's always been. We survived didn't we? Informality is an important value for Israelis. It shows in the way we speak our minds and do not mince words (“dugri” in Hebrew). It shows in the way we dress, in the way we behave in company, no implicit respect to hierarchy, status or “class”. “You may be a tycoon but I am a tycoon in waiting”. This casualness and informality extends to our consumerism ( “ a fixed price tag is an invitation to a negotiation”), our (lack of) dress code, our presentation skills and many aspects of personal and professional conduct. It has a good side to it too, Israelis are experts in “beating the system”, take shortcuts, extract themselves from “inextricable” situations that others will never get into in the first place. Israel is a high-tech giant on a global scale and much has been written about why it is so for a tiny country like Israel. Innovation, ingenuity and improvisation that are part of the Israeli Code must have something to do with it. So, ask me what I am going to do when I grow up and I'll tell you: “who knows if I'll be here when I grow up. Who knows if Israel will be here, who needs to bother thinking about it now with so much uncertainty and volatility (“Nichye ve Nireh” or in English we'll live to find out why worry now)”.

### **The 8<sup>th</sup> Commandment: Thou shalt not let others decide for you**

For Israelis any form of directive must first be examined as a potential “invalid command” (an accepted military concept). Regardless of the hierarchal or authoritative source of the directive, it is at best accepted as a recommendation. No blind faith, no automatic acceptance (with the possible but not definitive exception in the military). In most Universities the Professor lectures and the Students listen, take notes and ask questions from time to time. In Israel universities lectures are a platform for expressing and offering opinions (even by students who did not bother to do the reading). Inter personal equality starts from childhood. It shows in the way parents let their children do mostly what they feel like, what makes them happy because sooner or later they are going to join the army and who knows? Let them have a good time for as long as they can. Educating children to respect (even parental) authority? –Not us. We are our children's friends. No discipline at home that of course extends to the public sphere. Why get a babysitter if you can take the baby to the theater with you. So what if the baby cries during a dramatic scene? He/she's only a baby what do you expect. What about Public signs? –Do not walk on the lawn, do not light fire, no food or drinks, children must be accompanied by adults, restricted to 14 years and over – Interesting! Israelis feel very uncomfortable with “hierarchical institutions” especially when they travel abroad and they do plenty of it. “Institutions” like hotels, restaurants, opera houses and such were service staff members cater to their (sometime unreasonable) demands. Customer service to Israelis is a form of hierarchical subordination to the point of humiliation.

For that reason Israelis do not (generally speaking) provide good service, they do not appreciate good service and they can't recognize good or bad service when they see it. When in Israel looking for good service – good luck! We're all friends.

**The 9<sup>th</sup> Commandment: Thou shalt treat “their” business as your business.**

Israelis have a strong sense of “collectiveness”. We love to get involved in other people's lives and more so view it as some sort of an obligation. All Israelis are friends. We face the same threats, we share the same experiences and we know the same people. This is what keeps us together. We share the same destiny, the same future and it behooves us to look after each other, here and abroad. We have no manners but we will always offer someone a few coins for the parking meter so they don't get a fine, we'll rush to help them if they trip boarding a bus, we will not hesitate to stop and help someone replace a tire. It's an instinct a very strong feeling that “we are in it together”. Israelis will move heaven and earth to come to the rescue of Jewish communities in distress. If they it is the Iraqi Jews, the Yemenites, the Russian Jews, the Ethiopian Jews, a tradition of relentless efforts and at times true heroics. Once they settle in Israel we discriminate against them as they are not like us an attitude borders or crosses the line of racism. Go figure. Yet in Israel there exist a certain sense of security, uncommon in most countries of the world, a feeling that when in trouble someone will step forward to help you out. In this small and informal society everyone knows (almost) everybody directly or indirectly. We all went to the same schools, served in the same units in the army and studied together at the University. We always know someone who knows someone that you may need at any point in time: a doctor, a lawyer, a plumber, a mayor a cabinet minister. We're all very accessible. Remember – social equality, no hierarchies we're all in it togetherness.

**The 10<sup>th</sup> Commandment: Thou shalt be friendly and intimate but thou shalt not get too close**

The speed with which Israelis engage and expose themselves to each other either here in Israel or abroad is an amazing phenomenon. Non Israelis are not sure what to make out of it. At first they see it as intrusive, too forward if not rude. Yet they quickly realize that it is a sign of camaraderie, warmth, openness and self-assuredness. We Israelis are open and direct. We'll tell you all about us and our lives and we naturally expect that you will reciprocate. Israelis are everywhere in the world yet when you hear the Hebrew language in Costa Rica, Peru, Taiwan or Paris you drop everything and introduce yourself without hesitation. Before too long (no more than 5 minutes) you discover mutual friends and acquaintances and you just made new friends. But with all that warmth, openness and being uninhibited, Israelis find it difficult to be sexual or erotic (at least in public) as do Europeans or Americans for that matter. You will seldom see a young couple French kissing on a park bench let alone more passionate “expressions”. Love and the making of it is a private thing. Romance and romantic gestures are viewed as non-pragmatic and reserved to special occasions (weddings, anniversaries and such) and besides in such a threatening and uncertain world how can we possibly disengage from reality and absorb ourselves in emotional encounters let alone erotica.

There you have it. When you come to Israel and you're being pushed around and trampled on when trying to catch a cab, or crushed when trying to board a bus at a station even though you were the first in line, or if you are lost or confused and Israelis anticipate your dilemma and are quick to help or if you want to meet some of the friendliest, warm and hospitable bunch, you came to the right place.

Welcome to Israel!