

1. . What are some of your personal conclusions you have from the course about self and/or your (if relevant) Jewish identity?

On a personal level I have little to no confusion about my Jewish Identity and my ability to reconcile my Israeli heritage with the fact that I live in Canada for more than 40 years now. Most of my Canadian friends and associates and particularly Jews who have been to Israel before think of me as a “cultured” Israeli when compared to their stereotypical image of Israelis. They do not associate me and rightly so, with the Canadian Jewish community towards which admittedly I do not have special affinity. I remember a Montreal born colleague of mine once telling me: “Are you sure you’re Jewish? I lived in Montreal for many years in a Jewish neighborhood and you are nothing like them”. Thus outwardly I proudly present my Israeli identity with its implicit Jewishness thereof together with a good dose of Zionism. However and more importantly, inwardly my Jewish identity trumps my Israeli origins. If I were to classify my association with the Jewish faith I would likely create a new stream that of Jewish “familism”. Even though I was brought up in an entirely secular home, and likely through my education as a child in Israel, I have tremendous pride in the Jewish traditions, heritage, culture and many of its customs and rituals especially in celebrating Jewish holidays. Familism to me is a duty an obligation and a privilege to ensure that my children and my grandchildren are exposed, engaged and embrace the core traditional Jewish values following my personal example. I do so not so much for fear of break in continuity, assimilation or any other reason than the belief that this will make them better people and make our family a better unit.

Attending this course and living in Israel for nine months did not for a moment erode my Israeli-Canadian-Jewish identity one bit. In fact it probably strengthened it. However this experience has amplified in my mind, if not generated some serious anxieties. I believe that both the Jewish and Israeli identities in Israel are in a state of deep crisis, one that is entirely unrelated to Israel’s traditional security concerns and existential threats from its hostile neighbors.

I was not there but I can imagine God saying to Moses: “whatever you do, do not break the tablets”. What I discovered in Israel is that the tablets are seriously cracked and if not urgently mended are liable to break sooner than most Israelis expect or believe. I would not hesitate to define it as a breakdown in civil society core values and a disturbing onset of growing cynicism if not apathy. I do not remember a period in which Israel experienced such levels of divisiveness, radicalism, fundamentalism, lawlessness and even racism. Israeli society and Israeli leadership should such emerge must realize that Israeli identity and its related Jewish identity require urgent re-definition.

Are we the State of the Jews? Are we a Jewish State? Are we a society built on traditional Jewish values of justice, integrity, honesty, tolerance and respect for the law and for each other? The restoration of Israel’s civil society to its earlier cohesive roots and its “Or La-Goym” mission is, in my opinion, a top

priority and a pre-requisite to maintaining the rapidly eroding Jewish identity both in Israel and in the diaspora.

Let us face it. No amount of reality shows, populism, global integration and imitation of a shallow, instant culture across the pond is going to advance us toward this target. Is anybody listening?

2. Which population you believe is having a more challenging task in negotiating into Israeli Jewish Identity? The former Soviet Union Jews, or the Jews from Ethiopia? Please explain.

In view of recent events in Israel the answer to this question is quite obvious. The Ethiopian community continues to experience great difficulties integrating into the Israeli society on both the social, economic and political level. Recently and entirely not due to their own fault or doing, their situation has, in my opinion, been aggravated owing to the much more serious situation of the Sudanese and Eritreans refugees. The uninformed reader would immediately point to the fact that aside from their African origin, there seems to be no connection. Ethiopian's are Jews (or are they in the eyes of some Israelis?), they are full-fledged citizens of Israel, they serve in the IDF, they pay taxes, Israel went to great and courageous length to save them from the perils of Sudanese reality, they are definitely not refugees, so what seems to be the connection? Let's face it: the color of their skin. The Ethiopian immigration, the latest wave of mass immigration to Israel has exposed the heretofore hidden discrimination or more accurately racism within the Israeli society.

But, let's go back to the beginning. Over its short history, Israel probably and definitely proportionately to any other state in the world has done an incredible job when it comes to absorption of mass immigration. While with the Soviet immigration wave of the 70's and the 90's immigration of post – Communist Russia and ex-Soviet republics as well as the Ethiopian Jews. It is universally true that Immigration poses great challenges to both the immigrant population and the host society. It involves risks but it can also create great opportunities. Immediately following concerns for economic subsistence, the most obvious challenge is that of friction related to culture, traditions and customs. Let us take one example to illustrate the situation. In Ethiopia, acquiescence to higher authority is more important than telling the truth. Would it therefore follow that Ethiopians are dishonest people? Of course not, if you are familiar with Ethiopian discourse, but what if you are not? Both the “melting pot” and “multiculturalism” models have particular shortcomings when it comes to the absorption of Ethiopian immigrants. In both cases an economically weak society with a much wider cultural gap to bridge by comparison to the (European) Soviet immigration, devoid of professional skills, with low levels of education is destined to be marginalized. Attempts have been made to bridge the divide with the Ethiopian community by appointing Ethiopian “mediators” of the more educated successful members of the community, but it seems that such efforts failed as it only exasperated the isolation factor in treating the community as the “Other”.

The Soviet immigration had its own trials and tribulations while with language barriers, under employment and over qualification. However at the same time they have “imported” to Israel extremely valuable cultural, educational and professional assets that have benefitted the Israeli society to a far larger degree than would be objectively possible to expect from the Ethiopian community. The Soviet immigration while still not fully integrated, at least socially in the Israeli landscape, is a much stronger community and traditionally possesses higher survivability skills, professional standards, educational excellence and appreciation and participation in the fields and music, theater, arts and sports. Does that make the Soviet immigration better than the Ethiopian? Of course not! Israel's strength is in its numbers.

Therefore it is in Israel's best interest to strengthen the Ethiopian community rather than marginalize it. They want to and are capable of succeeding as part of the Israeli society given more time, patience, dialog and most of all tolerance.

3. In what different ways Israeli and U.S. Jews see each other's identity?

In order to understand how and why Israeli and U.S. Jews see each other's identity, we first have to understand the fundamental differences between the two communities. There are roughly the same number of Jews in Israel and the United States - more than five million in each country. But the relationship of Jews both to each other and to the rest of the society is vastly different in the two countries, says Arnold Dashefsky, a professor of sociology and the director of UConn's Center for Judaic Studies and Contemporary Jewish Life. The reason is obvious. In Israel Jews are 80 percent of the Israeli population but they are only 1.5 percent of the U.S. population. Jews are a tiny though influential, if not affluent minority in the U.S. and a dominant majority in Israel. Furthermore most Israelis were either born in Israel or immigrated to it for idealistic reasons (Zionism) in order to make it a Jewish homeland whereas the motivation of the early Jewish immigrants to the U.S. was to improve their economic condition or to escape persecution or rebuild their lives as Holocaust survivors. There are more, but if we only consider those two it goes far in explaining how American Jews see their Jewish identity versus how Israelis see their Jewish identities and just as importantly how they see each other's identity.

For Israeli Jews like me, (secular yet traditional; raised in the pioneering spirit of Zionism), Jewish identity is taken for granted. If we refer to Infeld's 5 legged table Israelis regardless of their religious affiliation already have at least 2 if not 3 legs going for them: supporting Israel by being there or by contributing directly through military or civil service to its development and by speaking Hebrew. Israeli table only requires them to believe in God, and most do, for their Jewish table to be stable. For my "Jewish Identity" interview I first approached my sister who lives in Israel and asked her the question: "Are you Jewish?" and she responded: "You know, I am 75 years old and nobody ever asked me this question!" So what do Israelis think of their Jewish identity? The seculars only see the "doing" part of being Israeli as the manifestation of their Jewishness. In fact the radicalization in the ultra-Orthodox sector and the growing power and influence of religious laws and practices in Israel may in fact distance them further from experiencing their Jewish identity. The religious and ultra-orthodox differ and in many Israelis' opinion jeopardize the ability of Israel to maintain its Jewish – Democratic nature.

For U.S. Jews who view themselves, and rightly so, first and foremost as Americans the concern is more that of continuity, solidarity and tradition. Infeld's model is a modern, traditional, spiritual way to think of one's Jewish identity and as such may well offer a much better model for modern Jewish youth than to follow their parents' model whatever it may be without a personal commitment. The results of the latter are known: young Jews are assimilating in droves all across the Diaspora. The global village, social networks, post modernism, post Zionism, and other trendy distractions, are only contributing to the acceleration of this frightening phenomenon.

My main concern is that Israel and support for Israel has been over the years the unifying factor and the common denominator in defining Jewish identity for both Israelis and American Jews. Recent trends in Israeli society, particularly radicalization of the so, called Left academic and intellectual "elite", the rise

of fundamentalism in the ultra-Orthodox sector and the radicalization of the Right wing settlers community are eroding and confusing many in Israel and in the U.S as to their Jewish identity.