

A Secular Return to the Bible? Reflections on Israeli Society, National Memory, and the Politics of the Past

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The significance of the Hebrew Bible for the Zionist *Yishuv* and for Israeli society in its early post-independence years is well known. Hebrew, the language of the Bible, emerged as the national tongue, and biblical themes and images inspired poetry and fiction, songs, plays, and visual arts. Schools emphasized the attachment to the Bible as a means of bolstering students' Hebrew identity and their bond with the land. For the largely secular, Zionist immigrants that established the foundations of the national Hebrew culture, the significance of the Bible was defined primarily in national terms as the cherished repository of Jews' historical roots and ancient heritage. During the 1950s and 1960s, the grassroots appeal of archaeology and the Bible was among the salient features of Israeli national culture, promoted by leading public figures and reinforced by the state's iconic and symbolic forms.

Since the 1970s, however, the special status of the Bible has weakened considerably in Israeli culture. Biblical scholars Uriel Simon and Yair Zakovitch and historian Anita Shapira addressed this phenomenon, pointing out that the once-sacred book that served as a unifying symbolic text has become politicized, marginalized, less familiar to secular Israelis, and progressively less accessible to the youth. The changing status of the Bible may be in part an expression of a post-nationalist phase of a society that is more strongly rooted in its land and no longer feels the urgent need to rely on the ancient past to forge its national identity and culture. Yet the decline of the Bible is to a large extent linked to its politicization in conflicts that continue to divide Israeli society and that impact Israelis' perceptions not only of the present and the future but also of the past.

In the post-1967 era, the Bible and the biblical Land of Israel (*Eretz Yisrael*) have been central to the Jewish settlers' expansionist agenda beyond the 1967 borders and often appear in the Israeli Right's political discourse. The renaming of the West Bank with the biblical terms "Judea" and "Samaria" and the pervasive references to biblical sites and the biblical forefathers attest to the centrality of the Bible for the Jewish settlers in this area as well as to its mobilization in support of political ends.



An advertisement for "Songs of the Bible" in a music store at Ben Gurion International Airport, Tel Aviv, August 2009. Photo by the author.

Conversely, for those who see the Jewish settlements as a major obstacle for the peace agenda, the association of the Bible with these highly controversial positions, which they reject, has undermined their own identification with it.

In addition, the growing political power of Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox (*haredi*) Jews since the 1980s has intensified the struggles over the role of religion in Israeli life, the tensions between civic and religious law, and the Orthodox entitlement to the interpretation of Jewish law. The politics of religion has thus contributed to the perception of the Bible as a religious text that is identified with Orthodox and *haredi* life and is therefore less relevant to secular Israelis. These deep divisions have inevitably diminished the status of the Bible as a unifying national text.

During the last few years, I have been working on a book that examines the changing cultural representations of the Bible in contemporary Israeli culture. In pursuing this topic, I have become intrigued by the recent surge in various cultural forms relating to

the Bible and the growing realization that we may be facing a new cultural shift indicating a secular return to the Bible. The revived interest suggests that although the status of the Bible has changed, it may have not lost its cultural capital. This interest may occur despite the current political divisions and, in part, as a reaction to them. Yet it appears that this cultural process is neither linear nor uniform.

The recent surge of works and activities related to the Bible is evident most clearly at the level of popular culture, but resonates beyond it. Literary and cultural critics may dismiss the popular expressions as "Bible-lite" and see them as a passing cultural fad, yet their growing visibility suggests that this is an important topic of inquiry.

Meir Shalev's *Bible Now*, published in 1985, has been credited as an early sign of the new wave of popular reinterpretations of the Bible. Shalev presents his own musings about select biblical narratives that he reinterprets from a contemporary, secular perspective as he points out analogies (or contrasts) with Israeli society today. *Bible Now* thus presents a double critique of religious interpretations of the Bible and of Israeli society and political culture in the 1980s. The juxtaposition of the original biblical texts—which Shalev assumes his readers know—and the contemporary text of *Bible Now*—with its modern, journalistic-style Hebrew and colloquial idioms, unabashed secularist stance, direct criticism of religious commentaries, and allusions to present-day politics—creates a humorous framework with evocative and provocative satirical elements.

The proliferation and diversity of publications related to the Bible in recent years is one of the most salient features of this new wave. A host of books by expert scholars present discussions about the Bible that are directed to the general public. An even larger number of books on the Bible are written by the non-experts, including journalists, writers, academics outside the field of biblical scholarship, and public intellectuals. Some of these publications address specific books of the Bible or biblical themes, while others focus on the interpretation of biblical narratives within the framework of the weekly Torah portions. These works vary considerably in

their scholarly level, literary quality, and intellectual rigor. Nonetheless, some of these books reached the bestsellers list even when faced with critical or negative reviews. In the introduction to his book, *My Heroes: Four Biblical Journeys* (2008), the 45-year old journalist and television host Yair Lapid describes his recent discovery of the Bible: "In the last ten years I've dedicated a great deal of my free time to the Bible. . . . I plunged into the text with great enthusiasm and passion, tinged with a sense of a loss. I wish I could get back all those years I ignored it." Lapid gives voice to secular Israelis' desire to reclaim the Bible as part of their living culture. Recent biblical fiction represents another, if more limited, literary trend that has met with noticeable success, perhaps following a global trend exemplified by the reception of Anita Diamant's *The Red Tent* (1997). Other works pursue the satirical path, offering subversive and irreverent versions of biblical stories to target contemporary Israeli issues through various genres and media. The full-feature film entitled *This is Sodom*, created by the cast of the popular satirical television show *Eretz Nehederet* (Wonderful Country), was an instant hit in Israeli theaters.

Public programs and performances on biblical themes and commentaries on the weekly Torah portions are sponsored by educational organizations, cultural centers, and public institutions and are regularly broadcast in the radio and the television. These programs, which usually host a wide variety of speakers, are clearly directed at the non-specialist consumer. Entertainment and educational activities are offered in archeological parks and tourist sites as well, most notably around holidays and during the summer vacation. These enterprises suggest various degrees of commercialization, a trend that is more clearly manifested in the tourist industry. The development of biblical tourism, once associated primarily with Christian pilgrims and Jewish tourists, is now also aimed at Israeli visitors. Ironically, such touristic representations that wish to present a distinct Hebrew national past are often shaped by conventions borrowed from global heritage and religious tourism even when they are transmitted to native Hebrew speakers.

My study of the recent return to the Bible suggests that this cultural shift stems from diverse, and at times contradictory, orientations. To a certain extent this secular return has developed out of a nostalgic yearning for the prestate era that now appears as representing a more "authentic" Hebrew culture and is characterized, among other things, by

the attachment to the Bible. Such nostalgic sentiments are often used by commercial entrepreneurs as well as political strategists. The recent repackaging of historical and contemporary Israeli songs under the label "Songs of the Bible" has given them a new life. The set has been prominently displayed in the music store *Tav Shmini* at the Ben Gurion airport (see photo). The recent tourism campaign launched by *Yesha*, the Council of the Jewish settlements in Judea, Samaria, and Gaza, acknowledged the targeting of secular Israelis' nostalgic connection to biblical stories, with the goal of bringing them over, physically and metaphorically, to that region and win their support for the settlements.

The secular return to the Bible is also linked to a different trend that represents a broader secular interest in Jewish tradition. Of late, a growing sense of loss among secular Israelis has led them to look for ways to reconnect with Jewish tradition as part of a cultural, rather than religious, heritage. Departing from the earlier view that saw the Bible as a sacred national canon associated with antiquity and regarded the Talmud as a religious text associated with Jewish life in exile, the current trend articulates secular Israelis' desire to get reacquainted with both canonic texts without such distinctions. A wide variety of secular

organizations and teaching institutions provide classes on the Bible and the Talmud that are taught from a secularist-culturalist perspectives, even while employing traditional religious concepts such as *bet midrash*, *yeshiva*, or *havruta*.

Secular Israelis' search for spirituality and for their pre-Israeli roots is a critical factor in their heightened engagement with tradition. Their ideological positions, however, may vary greatly between those who see it as way to bridge cultural gaps with religious and traditional Jews, and those who maintain a more militant secularist approach and consider their study as a means to strengthen their opposition to the Orthodox establishment and its claim over the interpretation of these texts. The renewed interest in the Bible has thus led to the emergence of a wide variety of cultural forms and practices that provide a fascinating arena for the study of Israelis' transforming attitudes toward the past and complex understanding of their contemporary identities.

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state of Israel. It is believed that Israel is a good sample to think about the association between foreign affairs and political attitudes since it is characterized as a socio-religiously divided society and often waged war against Arab military forces. 2. Modern democracies contain a core to convert the will of the people into public policy in the form of legislation via national elections. Since diplomacy is a highly ordinary citizens to assess foreign policies in consideration of the national interest. Modern political elites in democracies need popular support to make critical decisions, such as waging war. Israel and the politics of Jewish identity: the secular-religious impasse. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press. Google Scholar. The state of the nation: contemporary challenges to Zionism in Israel. *Constellations: An International Journal of Critical and Democratic Theory*, 6(No. 3), 325-338. Google Scholar. Ram, U. (2000). National, ethnic or civic? contesting paradigms of memory, identity and culture in Israel. *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 19(Nos. 5-6), 405-422. Article Google Scholar. Ratosh, Y. (1982). In "A Note to the Hebrew Youth". In idem, *The First of Days: Hebrew Introductions* (p. 35). Tel Aviv (Hebrew). The stagnation of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process has resulted from both Israeli and Palestinian political elites moving away from the Oslo Peace Paradigm (bilateral negotiations to produce a two-state solution) and pursuing approaches which do not support a renewing of negotiations. Israel has been increasingly moving towards a rejection of the establishing of a Palestinian state based on the 1967 borders, including the West Bank, Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem as the end-goal of any Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. This should not be read as a rejection of a two-state solution by Israel in terms of the separation of Israel from Palestine but rather a rejection of the idea of a Palestine as a state). Israeli society needs to compromise and establish a new equilibrium, says Ravitzky. Writing a constitution is one step in this process. "But anyone believing this would enforce the separation of state and religion is wide of the mark," he warns, himself a religious Jew. "The bond between religion and state, Jewish heritage and Israeli identity, is indissoluble." Feedback. Mehr lesen 1/4ber. Israel Religion. (Hirschfeld; emphasis added) With all its rhetorical force, Hirschfeld's essay must be seen as an attempt to defend mainstream Hebrew literary culture against explicit or tacit allegations that secular Israeli literature and culture lost touch with the great issues at the centre of the Jewish historical experience. Others, like Charles Liebman, argue that it is the product of the polarization of Israeli politics and of Israeli society's metaphysical and spiritual view of the world (Liebman and Katz). I have not found in Israeli secular culture any text or guide on how to gladden a bride and her groom, nor one that will console mourners - actually our secularist culture is a culture of nothingness. |