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### Secularization in Israel

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### Abstract and Keywords

Neither the study of the political system nor surveys of individual religiosity capture the full picture of secularization in Israel. The power of religious parties seems unshaken, and formal changes in religious policies and legislation are few. A large number of Israelis maintain their attachment to Jewish religion in beliefs and practices, and the Jewish majority agrees that Israel is and must remain a “Jewish state.” However, economic and demographic trends in the past two decades have caused incremental changes, not registered in formal political channels, toward the partial yet significant secularization of Israel. Religion still has a hold on private beliefs and practices, but secularization will unfold in societal changes involving a decline of religious authority over significant spheres of life. A more complex concept of secularization allows for contradictions observed in Israel and helps to explain how secularization can occur while religion remains embedded in state and society.

Keywords: secularization, secularism, Israel, Judaism, Zionism, Orthodox Judaism, religious freedom

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SEcularization seems a strange term to apply to describe the developments in Israel. Religion continues to play an important and disputed role in both private and public life in Israel, religious parties hold significant power, and, consequently, a separation of religion and state is unlikely in the near future. Religion is welded into the essence of nationality that is built into the Jewish definition of the state and is institutionalized through religious institutions that have a direct bearing on individual lives on intimate issues such as marriage and divorce. The late writer and journalist Israel Segal, a secularist who left the ultra-Orthodox world years ago, provided a pessimistic account of a secular defeat in a culture war: “In my view, the full-scale war has already ended in defeat for the secular people. ... [W]e are living under a regime of occupation imposed by a *haredi* (ultra-Orthodox) minority and this occupation is growing more intensive” (Segal, 1999: 140).

While studies of religion and politics in Israel may have been right about their assessment of secularism, they missed other important developments that suggest secularization may be part of contemporary life. The expansion of commerce on the Sabbath, a thriving nonkosher culinary culture, marriages performed without Orthodox rabbis, civil burials, and even an annual lively gay pride parade (that recently came to the fore after a parade in Jerusalem was attacked and one of the participants murdered). These relatively new developments encounter opposition but overall allude that the religious hold on public and private life may be changing. What is unique about these developments, and explains why they remained under the radars of social scientists, is first, the fact they are not necessarily related to a secular ideology; second, they occur alongside a religious resurgence; and, third, they advance outside of formal political processes. These developments fall far short of religious freedom or a liberal order, but since the early 1990s secular Israelis have gained new freedoms and choices that defy religious authority.

Neither the study of the political system nor surveys of individual religiosity capture the full picture of secularization in Israel. Politically, the power of religious parties seems unshaken, and formal changes in religious policies and legislation are few and minor. Individually, a large number of Israelis maintain their attachment to Jewish religion in beliefs and practices, and many have become more religious in various ways. Moreover, the consensus among the Jewish majority that Israel is and must remain a “Jewish state” guarantees (p. 173) the all-but-permanent importance of religion in public life. However, economic and demographic changes in the past two decades have created new incentives and opportunities for secular entrepreneurs and, following their actions, for Israelis to challenge existing institutions. These incremental changes, not registered in formal political channels, establish the partial, yet significant, secularization of Israel.

Secularization, as Mark Chaves (1994) suggests, is most productively conceived as a “decline in religious authority” and the decrease in the influence of religious values, leaders, and institutions over individual behavior, social institutions, and public discourse. The influence of these processes on individual indicators of religiosity—belief or practices—remains an open question, but secularization need not imply that most individuals relinquish all their interest in religion (Chaves 1994; Lechner 1991). Religion, according to this argument, may still have a hold on private beliefs and practices, but secularization will unfold in societal changes that involve a decline of religious authority over significant spheres of life. The disaggregation of the concept of secularization enables us to come to terms with the contradictions observed in Israel and explain how secularization can occur, while at the same time religion remains embedded in state and society.

## Religion and Nationalism

Zionism established itself as a national movement led by Jews who rebelled against the Orthodox leadership and followed the modernization of Jewish life that began in the eighteenth century. Zionism, which appeared toward the end of the nineteenth century, was one form of modern Jewish identity, related to the growing national sentiment across Europe and to the anti-Semitism that threatened to undermine Jewish emancipation. The solution to the “Jewish problem,” argued Zionist leaders, was not emancipation but territorial sovereignty that would “normalize” Jewish existence. Jewish nationalism, on one hand, was a secular ideology but, on the other hand, could not completely detach itself from its religious roots. As a secular ideology, Zionism challenged religious authority that held the view that Jewish redemption would come about with the advent of the Messiah. As a national ideology, religion was indispensable to Zionism as a marker of boundaries and a mobilizing force. This ambivalence toward religion could hardly be resolved, as secular nationalists would often acknowledge.

Zionism not only had to challenge religious institutions by presenting its national destiny, but it also had to separate itself from what religiosity symbolized. National revival implied a break with the past and the attempt to replace Judaism, a religion identified with the old world, with Jewishness, a modern identity based on culture, ethnicity, a historical sense of belonging to the Jewish people, and a proactive approach toward the future. Theodor Herzl, a secularized Jew and one of the founders of the Zionist movement, envisioned a secular entity with a separation of religion and state. But, as Herzl and those who followed discovered, religion was not easy to dismiss or confine. The territorial debate was exemplary of the power of religion and religious symbols, as attempts to find territorial solutions outside Palestine, the historical land of Israel, encountered strong opposition. When a plan that came to be known as the “Uganda Plan” to settle Jews in Africa was brought before the Zionist Congress in 1903, it encountered fierce resistance. Only the historic Land of Israel (*Eretz Israel*), it was (p. 174) acknowledged, could evoke sentiments among a critical mass of Jews, sentiments mediated through traditional religious symbols. Not only for internal purposes was the symbolic value of the Land of Israel significant. Externally, the Zionist claim to this specific territory combined a historical relation with a reference to God’s promise that granted the land to the Jewish people.

In the nation-building process, religious symbols have played a major instrumental role. Zionism developed the classic features of organic nationalism, producing its own cult of ancient, biblical history, the contact with the soil and the desire to strike roots in it, and the “sanctification” of the territory where the ancient biblical heroes lived and fought

(Sternhell 1998). The seemingly secular Zionism was cultivated by the messianic enthusiasm and adopted religious symbols (Shapira 1992) so that, beneath a thin veneer of secularism, a Jewish tradition never ceased to exist. The Hebrew culture adopted by Zionists and the civil religion it created reinterpreted religious texts and borrowed from traditional Jewish culture so that almost all its symbols, rites, and myths bore a religious significance (Don-Yehia and Liebman 1984). The Bible and Jewish religious tradition, after selection and reinterpretation, provided for Zionism a narrative of continuity of nationhood, connection to the land, culture, and a calendar for national life. This calendar included the Jewish day of rest on the Sabbath and Jewish holidays emptied of their old religious Jewish content, which was replaced with symbols of new national experience and expectations, turning them into celebrations of national liberation (Ben-Porat 2000; Liebman and Don-Yehia 1984; Ram 2008ba).

As a result, Zionism could lend religion its own interpretation but could never completely detach itself—as it continued to be directed by powerful religious structures (Raz-Krakotzkin 2000; Ben-Porat 2000) and share “a common ideological mantle” with religion and the religious population (Elam 2000). Both symbolic and practical political questions kept Jewish religion inside the political life of the nation and, later, of the state. First, the Zionist movement also included religious groups that shared with secular Zionists the desire to establish sovereignty. Second, more important, the Zionist claim to speak on behalf of the Jewish people encouraged it to seek wide support and forced it to make compromises on practical religious questions. Third, religion has always remained in the background as a legitimating force for territorial claims.

## Political Compromise

The debates over the role of religion in public life became concrete after the establishment of the state of Israel when the sovereign state was required to define the rules of the game. In 1947, the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine was formed to deliberate the future of Palestine and the possibility of establishing a Jewish state. In order to create a united Jewish position, David Ben-Gurion, leader of the Zionist Labor Party, sent a letter to the ultra-Orthodox party Agudat Israel to ensure them that the future state would respect religious rights and provide a role for Jewish religion in public life. The letter, known as the status quo, became a cornerstone of future religious-secular arrangements. The commitments in the letter were somewhat vague, but the status quo laid down a basic agreement on the Jewish character of the state of Israel that enabled secular and religious political elites to formulate compromises and avoid conflicts (Don-Yehia 2000).

(p. 175) Two of the components of the status quo, institutionalized after statehood, dealt largely with duties and obligations. First, ultra-Orthodox yeshiva students were exempted from military service, meaning that the burden of defense in a country with universal conscription would not be equally shared. Second, the government granted autonomy to the ultra-Orthodox school system, a decision that raised debates over issues of curricula and funding. Three other components had a more direct effect on the lives of secular Jews: the designation of Saturday, the Sabbath, as the day of rest, with the mandatory closing of stores and public services; the required observance of Jewish dietary rules (*kashrut*) in public institutions; and the Orthodox monopoly over burial, marriage, and divorce.

The status quo operated as a guideline for religious–secular negotiations during the first decades of statehood (Susser and Cohen 2000). State laws based on the status quo included the jurisdiction of rabbinical courts over marriage and divorce, educational autonomy for religious groups, and declaration of the Sabbath as the official day of rest. Beyond legislation and formal institutions regulating private lives, the status quo included informal institutions that helped overcome disagreements. These included refraining from formal and binding decisions over controversial matters, favoring coalition partnerships over majority rule, allowing religious autonomy in specific areas, and attempting to shift disputes from national-political to judicial and local arenas. The general desire to avoid conflict shared by many Jewish Israelis, external threat, challenges of state-building, and political cooperation between the dominant Labor Party and the National Religious Party upheld the functionality of the status quo for reinforcement of consensus with respect to the state.

The majority of nonreligious Israelis continued to relate to codes, values, symbols, and a collective memory that could hardly be separated from Jewish religion (Kimmerling 2004: 354) and remained loyal to the idea of a “Jewish state.” The secular idea of a Jewish state referred to ethnicity or culture, but religion was called up as the gatekeeper to provide the criteria for inclusion and exclusion (Ram 2008b). The status quo arrangements granted religious Orthodoxy the monopoly over significant aspects of public and private lives in Israel. Publicly, Orthodox rabbis and establishments are funded by the state and only orthodox rabbis hold official positions in bureaucracy and the military. The Orthodox monopoly also impacts private lives as, for example, there is no civil marriage in Israel and (for Jews) only marriage conducted by an Orthodox rabbi can be registered by the state.

## Secularism

While the majority of Israelis, religious and nonreligious, for the reasons described previously, accepted the status quo as a given, others attempted to challenge it, demanding religious freedom. Secular ideas advocating freedom—described in terms of religion–state separation, freedom from religion, or religious freedom—have been part of political life since the rise of Zionism. Roots of this secularism can be found in different historical, social, and ideological sources that include the Jewish Enlightenment movement, which appeared toward the end of the eighteenth century and attempted to bridge the gap between Jewish identity, modern science, and citizenship of the nation-state.

Secular ideas and ideologies that continued to develop engaged with both theoretical dilemmas of Jewish identity and practical political questions of rights and obligations.

(p. 176) Influenced by the ideas of enlightenment, some secularists attempted to merge their Jewishness with liberal-humanistic perspectives, universal moral principles, support of individual liberties, and rationality held above religious commandments. Secular-humanistic Jews see themselves as individuals who “wish to belong to the Jewish people and continue the tradition of the Jewish people completely free of any supernatural authority. They believe in the sanctity of the human personality and the inviolability of dignifying human honor and integrity” (Bauer 2006: 37). The universal secular humanism developed alongside, and at times against, more particularist secular visions of Jewish cultural-ethnic identity and concrete demands for religious freedom, independent from universal-liberal visions. The different attempts to define Jewish identity in cultural rather than religious terms implied the rejection of religious authority and resistance to the ultra-Orthodox monopoly over significant aspects of public life. In practical political terms, it implied the vision of a secular public domain where religion would exercise its authority only over those who chose to accept it.

Secular challenges to the status quo in early years of statehood were few, and mostly local and short-lasting. One exception was the League against Religious Coercion, formed in the 1950s, which developed a comprehensive agenda and explained it would

distribute among the general public the idea that a man’s convictions are his own private affair and so in Israel it is essential to struggle for the separation of religion and state, freedom of religion, belief and conscience; to encourage and support any individual who feels that he himself has been damaged ... by religious restrictions.

(Tzur 2001: 220)

Assisted by the organizational resources of the kibbutzim, the league struggled for civil marriage, easing the requirements for conversion to Judaism, and ending the restrictions on activities on Shabbat ("Shabbat without chains"). In 1955, the league submitted a petition with 100,000 signatures to the Knesset (Parliament), demanding a referendum on the authorization of civil marriage (Tzur 2001: 212). The league, however, failed to mobilize the general public, and its cooperation with the secular parties did not yield any significant results either. Its activities gradually declined until it disappeared after the 1967 war.

The secular-liberal political agenda that advocated religious pluralism and freedom of choice instead of the status quo and the religious monopoly appealed only to a small group with marginal political power. For the majority of Israelis, the support or acceptance of the role of religion in public life resulted from pragmatic political attitudes, the continued attachment to religious symbols and rituals, and a "traditional" self-identity located between religious and secular. Surveys carried out between 1969 and 1985 found that 15 to 25 percent of the population defined themselves as Orthodox (*dati*), 40 to 45 percent as traditional (*masorti*), and another 35 to 45 percent as nonreligious (Kedem 1991). Many Israelis, including those who defined themselves as nonreligious, took part in religious rituals during holidays (Passover) or private events (marriage, burial, and circumcision). Jewish Orthodoxy, therefore, acted as what Grace Davie (2007) described elsewhere as a vicarious religion: "performed by an active minority but on the behalf of a much larger number, who (implicitly at least) not only understand, but, quite clearly, approve of what the minority is doing." (p.22) The role religion played in private lives and its role as a gatekeeper of the national boundaries has rendered the possibility of separating state and religion unlikely, even for those who described themselves as "nonreligious."

(p. 177) The "traditional" category many Israelis choose to describe their religiosity is not necessarily a comfortable middle position but is also an identity rooted in the ethnicity and culture of immigrants from the Middle East and North Africa (Mizrahim) and their descendants. The state's secular elite attempted to secularize these immigrants as part of a modernization process that showed little regard for the immigrants' traditions. However, the Mizrahim resisted secularization and developed a strategy of cultural accommodation, steering a religious path midway between Ashkenazi Orthodoxy and Ashkenazi secularism that they describe as "traditional" or *masorti* (Shokeid 1984). The traditional model open to variations in beliefs and practices and an oral tradition (different from Ashkenazi formality and its written tradition) was an "imported" pattern that developed among Jews in Muslim countries that, like the Muslim majority in their countries of origin, continued to perceive religion and religious authorities as significant even as they went through a modernizing process. This pattern is sustained in the second

and third generations of Mizrahim in Israel as well. Although flexible in some of its practices, the group maintains a conservative position regarding the role of religion in its community and is strict in its observance of rituals (Leon 2009).

Conservatism and the acceptance of the rules of the game as a given was shared until the 1980s by the majority of Israelis. Consequently, secularism as an ideology could hardly drive a process of secularization that would challenge the religious authority vested in the status quo. Not only religious Israelis but also traditional and nonreligious ones showed no desire for change. Specifically, restrictions on marriage and burial choices or activities on the Sabbath were accepted by the majority of Jewish Israelis. The rules and regulations limited freedoms but were perceived as constitutive to the Jewish character of the state, a necessary compromise between religious and secular, or simply an issue of minor importance that did not affect their everyday lives enough to justify action against them.

## Secularization

Secularization, a process of societal change and a decline of religious authority, could not advance in Israel by secularism, an ideology and a worldview shared by a small minority. In the 1980s, however, the consensus that underscored the status quo began to wane and secular resentment toward religious orthodoxy and especially the ultra-Orthodox (*haredim*) strengthened. Beyond the resentment, discussed later, three important changes provided new grounds for secularization and the opportunities for secular entrepreneurs to challenge the status quo and the orthodox monopoly: a neoliberal economy, the immigration of a million Jews from the former Soviet Union (FSU), and the emergence of religious and spiritual alternatives.

The modest collectivist ethos and the limited material resources available in early statehood provided a protective shield for the status quo. Life in Israel in the 1950s was rather simple, influenced by the pioneering ethos of state-building and the limitations of a developing economy. Liberal economic policies introduced since the 1970s took a more dramatic turn in the 1980s and set in motion the rapid rise of a consumer society similar to, and aspiring to be even more similar to, other Western countries. Economic growth exploded in the 1990s, influenced by immigration and the peace process, and the high-tech industry has raised the (p. 178) standard of living and brought with it the new possibilities and desires that characterize a consumer society—and the new lifestyles rendered the restrictive arrangements of the status quo difficult to maintain. Shopping malls and large stores, many of them American or global, began to emerge in the 1980s, offering a variety of commodities and a new shopping experience. The collective ethos of



frugality was replaced by individualism, hedonism, and a consumerism around which the Israeli middle class organized its daily life (Carmeli and Appelbaum 2004: 6). The consumerist desire for new experiences and the new leisure patterns were often incompatible with the religious restrictions of the status quo. For religious people, also influenced by consumer culture, the religious rules held firm, although some challenges to religious authority have emerged in relation to the use of the Internet or mobile phones, for example. However, secular Israelis (and, to a lesser extent, traditional ones) were ready to transgress the restrictions they no longer saw as fitting.

The immigration from the FSU, about a million immigrants who arrived between 1989 and 2000, was another important influence on secularization. Although this large group is not homogeneous, its members do share some general characteristics, including a secularization process they underwent during the communist regime, leaving them with only vague notions about Judaism (Ben-Rafael 2007; Leshem 2001). In addition, owing to intermarriage, about one-fourth of the immigrants do not meet the Orthodox criteria of Jewishness (Ben-Rafael 2007). The law grants Israeli citizenship to “the child or grandchild of a Jew, the spouse of a Jew, and the spouse of a Jewish child or grandchild.” According to Jewish Orthodoxy, a Jew is “someone who was born to a Jewish mother, and who does not belong to another religion, or someone who converted to Judaism.” Consequently, immigrants were granted citizenship under the Law of Return (1970) but were not considered Jewish by the Orthodox establishment unless they went through an Orthodox conversion process. The status quo agreements and the Orthodox monopoly caused considerable difficulties for the immigrants, especially for those not recognized as Jews who, among other difficulties they experienced, could not marry in Israel. This reinforced their tendency to remain as a separate community but also strengthened the political demands for change in the current state of affairs and, most important, initiatives that undermined the status quo.

FSU immigrants’ contribution to secularization, however, developed separately from that of veteran Israelis for two main reasons. First, the political orientation of the immigrants, described as “pragmatic-secular-rightist and ethnic” (Al Haj 2002: 240), was different from the more liberal political stance of most secular Ashkenazim. FSU immigrants, as a result of their Soviet experience (Shumsky 2001, 2004), adopted an ethnocentric approach that prevented cooperation with secular left-wing parties. Second, the FSU immigrant imported a “passive citizenship” approach (Philipov and Bystrov 2011) and a preference for practical solutions, often provided by “Russian” entrepreneurs or their political representatives, rather than for a struggle for comprehensive political change.

Alongside material and demographic changes, ideational developments also took a new turn of challenging the Orthodox monopoly, demanding that alternative Jewish identities be recognized by the state and receive an equal stance to Jewish Orthodoxy. The Reform

(Israeli Movement for Progressive Judaism) and Conservative (Masorti) movements became sharp critics of the status quo demanding religious pluralism. These movements that provide a less restrictive form of religiosity are not recognized by Israeli authorities and, therefore, do not receive state funding, and, among other things, marriages conducted by reform or conservative rabbis cannot be registered. Although the Reform and Conservative communities (p. 179) remained small and based mainly on immigrants from English-speaking countries, they received substantial backing from their related communities in the United States, which defended their status and enabled them to function without government funding for religious institutions, a budget that was controlled by the Orthodox establishment.

Beginning in the 1990s, an additional trend developed in Israel and became known as the “fourth stream,” or secular Judaism. It is difficult to characterize this trend, which was influenced by “New Age” orientations, the search for a Jewish identity, and the hope for a religious-secular dialogue, especially in the aftermath of Itzhak Rabin’s assassination in 1995. These groups frequently insisted on distinguishing themselves from Reform Jews, whom they associate with immigrants from English-speaking countries, and prefer to define their group as a deeply rooted Israeli development. For many of those who associate with secular Judaism, belonging includes the right for appropriation and reinterpretation of scriptures and the adoption of Jewish rituals to modern life and to universal values. Initially, this secular interest in Judaism and Jewish scriptures seemed to bring secular Jews closer to religion and the religious. However, the open and critical reading of texts and, more important, the reinterpretation of rituals and commandments directly challenged religious orthodoxy and the status quo.

The new forces behind secularization in the 1990s did not change the inherent ambivalence of Israeli secularism. While a minority of secular Israelis was occupied in a cultural and political struggle, for many Israelis secularization was about lifestyle and practical decisions related to everyday life. Religious authority, in the form of the rabbinate and affiliated institutions, however, was losing its authority not only because of the secular demands for religious freedom or practical individual decisions but also because of a tarnished image. Allegations of corruption, insensitivity, rigidity, and poor service were often waged against religious authorities and incorporated in the demands for change. In a survey conducted by a popular website, 41 percent of the respondents agreed with the statement that the chief rabbinate is no longer necessary ([www.ynetnews.com](http://www.ynetnews.com)). In a wider survey, only 45 percent of Jewish Israelis expressed trust in the chief rabbinate, a low score similar to those for political institutions such as the parliament or the government (Israel Democracy Institute 2007). The negative—and, at times, hostile—attitude of secular Israelis toward the rabbinate undermined its privileged position, its legitimacy, and its ability to exert authority.

## Countersecularization

As elsewhere, secularizing trends in Israel have met counterforces of religion fundamentalism fighting to defend their way of life and fashion the public realm surrounding it. Three important developments in religious revival have occurred in Israel alongside (and against) secularization: secular and traditional Jews adopting a religious way of life, the rise of a new and powerful ultra-Orthodox religious party, and a Zionist revival led by religious Jews. What is common to these three developments is the desire to strengthen the authority of religion in both private and public domains.

The movement encouraging Jews to return to a religious way of life (*hazarah be-teshuvah*) dates back to the crisis that affected Israeli society in the wake of the 1973 Yom Kippur war (Beit-Hallahmi 1992) as well as to the 1960s, when it was one among other spiritual trends (p. 180) (Caplan 2007). This trend received considerable attention, especially when secular celebrities embraced an Orthodox religious way of life and denounced their former lives. The return to religion has been orchestrated by religious entrepreneurs who specialize in finding ways to the hearts of nonreligious Jews using different strategies. The number of secularists who turned religious is unknown; *haredi* spokesmen mention numbers reaching into six figures, but researchers estimate their number at around 40,000 and that the overall influence of the *hozrim be-teshuvah* on the size of the *haredi* society is minor (Caplan 2007: 101–102).

The most important development of upsurge of religiosity among Mizrahim, Jews originating from Muslim countries, was SHAS, a political party that gained prominence from the 1980s onward. Combining ethnicity and religiosity, SHAS advocated a return to tradition against the secularization forced on Mizrahi immigrants. SHAS organized its activities using an extensive network of educational and welfare institutions, constituting a substitute for the receding welfare state and thereby reinforcing the party's standing with both the state, which used it as an intermediary, and with its voters, who became more dependent on this party network (Levi and Amreich 2001). Through its extensive educational and welfare network, SHAS became an important player in promoting religious (and antiseular) Jewish identity.

Religious Zionism was part of the Zionist movement, but, until the late 1960s, it settled for the secondary role of managing the religious institutions and protecting their monopoly. A younger generation of religious Zionists who took power after the war of 1967, however, was no longer willing to accept its marginal role. Gush Emunim ("Bloc of the Faithful"), which appeared on the scene during the 1970s, constituted an attempt by the religious Zionists to make headway into a position of leadership while fusing religion,

politics, and territoriality (Schwartz 1999: 83). Religious Zionists came to believe that secular Zionism has “fulfilled its mission and finished its role” (Karpel 2003: 15) and it was now their turn to assume leadership and settle the new territories occupied in the war to ensure they would become part of a larger Israel. The settlement of the territories—areas with historical and religious significance—was for religious Zionists the fulfillment of religious commandments and national duty. The national revival that Gush Emunim offered replicated many of the symbols and practices of secular Zionism but instilled them with religious meaning. Hiking the land, community life, Hebrew culture, and, especially, pioneering became the markers of the new movement (Ben-Porat 2000).

The three countersecularization developments—*hazarah be-teshuvah*, the growth of the SHAS party, and Gush Emunim—shared a common agenda to protect, first, what they described as “the Jewish character of the state” and, second, the authority of religion in public and private lives. These developments indicated that a privatization of religion was unlikely and that religion would remain a significant political force in years to come.

## Religious and/or Secular—The Numbers

Measured by self-identity, the numbers of religious and secularists in Israel have not changed radically, as many Israelis continue to describe themselves in surveys as “religious” or “traditional.” Measured by self-identity, differences among religious, traditional, and secular Israelis can be discerned. 47.9 percent of Israelis describe themselves as secular, 32.7 percent as traditional, 10.1 percent as religious, and 9.4 percent as ultra-Orthodox. At the same (p. 181) time, however, 80 percent of Jewish Israelis believe in God (Ben-Porat 2013). Secular Israelis tend to be more educated, Ashkenazi, and politically identified with the left and tend to describe themselves as upper-middle class. The “traditional” category is popular among Mizrahim. Furthermore, religiosity strongly correlates with a rightist political orientation. Secularization, however, is not necessarily about numbers of self-identified secularists but may be expressed in changes within the categories themselves, measured first by preferences, choices, and practices and second by their impact on religious authority.

The attempt to place the categories on a single-dimensional axis of religious belief based on self-definition not only misses out on the uniqueness of the groups and subgroups (Goodman 2003) but also overlooks the complexity and the multidimensional nature along the different axes of faith, behavior, and values and the changes that occur within those categories as they unfold in the everyday behavior of individuals. Thus, being “secular” or “traditional” might mean different things for different people, and, more important, this meaning can change over time or depend upon the context in which identity is defined.

Consequently, secularization unfolds not necessarily in identity change (as individuals continue to describe themselves “traditional” or even “religious”) but in actual choices and practices that defy religious authority. Similarly, people who identify themselves as “secular” may, in some instances, choose to obey religious authority and engage in religious practices.

Surveys and studies of Jewish religiosity in Israel depict a complex picture of beliefs, practices, and values. Many Israelis observe religious rites selectively, without being concerned with their theological import or with religious consistency. Thus, adherence to *kashrut* (dietary) laws may be partial or complete, motivated by belief or respect for the environment, and accompanied by the observance of various prohibitions and commandments—or not. Conversely, individuals who identify themselves as traditional, when faced with economic or leisure-related decisions, make choices that can be described as “secular” in the sense of defying religious laws or norms. People who shop on the Sabbath often do not regard themselves as secular, provide pragmatic and instrumental reasons for defying religious commandments, and obey other commandments and practices (Ben-Porat and Feniger 2009). Finally, many of those who identify themselves as secular practice some religious rituals, such as the fast on Yom Kippur and the Passover traditional seder, and believe that circumcision is an important ritual that must be observed.

The societal changes affect almost all groups but in different ways. On the religious side, openness toward the secular world (or to “modernity”) is manifested both in artistic creation (literature, cinema, and art) and consumer culture. Even among the ultra-Orthodox *haredim*, some changes are emerging in the patterns of consumption, culture, and leisure, as well as civil and political values and involvement, all of which draw them nearer to the secular world (El-Or and Neriah 2003; Stadler et al. 2008) but exert no influence on the essence of their religious identity (Caplan 2007: 252).

Secularization in Israel, as elsewhere, is a complex and nonlinear process that unfolds in a bricolage of beliefs, values, and choices and is matched by countersecularization processes. This bricolage is not arbitrary or individual but is mediated by ethnic, class, and religious identities. Measured in the declining authority of religion, secularization is manifested in practical choices of everyday life or in concrete demands for change that require neither a secular identity nor a coherent secular political agenda. Following these choices, the reasons behind them, and their impact reveals what is being secularized and how. The diversity and the seemingly blurred boundaries of the religious and secular categories do not necessarily (p. 182) indicate compromise and moderation. Rather, the demographic, economic, and ideational changes undermine the foundations of the status

quo, which is no longer able to provide the answers, and present a major challenge for the political system to provide answers and solutions.

## Political Standstill

The new demographic and economic developments described earlier presented new demands—for shopping on the Sabbath or civil marriage—that could not be answered by the status quo. The politics of accommodation that characterized the status quo was replaced by a “politics of crisis” that undermined stability, split the political system (Susser and Cohen 2000), and eventually rendered it ineffective. Secular resentment against what was perceived an infringement of religion on public lives and the exemption of ultra-Orthodox men from military service was channeled into political action and extraparliamentary activity. Opposition to “religious coercion” and support for pluralism became major issues for the secular parties and the parties representing immigrants from the FSU, all competing for the “secular vote.” Political parties with a pronounced secular agenda demanded curbing the *haredi* parties’ powers and promised to protect liberal freedoms.

The political system, however, on the one hand, was no longer able to enforce the old rules, but, on the other hand, was incapable of creating new, updated rules that could answer the rising challenges and contain the differences. The political standstill was not unique to questions of religion but was indicative of a deeper and wider political crisis and an unstable political system. This instability included frequent changes of elected governments that failed to complete their terms of office and a loss of public confidence in the democratic institutions. The ossification of political parties and low responsiveness of the Israeli representative government and the disappointing results of protest activity and extraparliamentary pressure encouraged citizens and political entrepreneurs to seek alternative courses of action outside the political system. Secular entrepreneurs—ideological atheists, advocates of Jewish renewal, FSU immigrants, or business owners—identified the needs, desires, and demands against the restrictions of the status quo and the opportunities to challenge the restrictions by different actions and services. In some cases, the motivations were political-ideological goals (promotion of civil marriage), and, in other cases, they were economic (opening businesses on Sabbath). These choices and strategies, based on different combinations of ideological or economic motives, at times consciously challenged the status quo with a clear political objective (civil marriage or burial). Many other times, however, these were individual choices that took advantage of opportunities (private marriage or burial services) and had no political aspirations.

Initiatives were supported by different arguments, including individual rights and freedoms, republican citizenship claims, and market rationality. Individual freedom arguments are characteristic of the ideological entrepreneurs and the more established Israeli secularism but have also been used by more recent secular initiatives. Liberal arguments, somewhat paradoxically, were complemented with republican arguments of good citizenship. This “republican equation” (Levy 2008) included a reciprocal relationship between the state and its citizens, in which the citizens’ contribution to the common good (military (p. 183) service) determined their citizenship status and allowed their claims toward or against the state. Israeli soldiers who were sons of immigrants, who could not be recognized as Jewish, receive Jewish burial, or get married under Jewish law, were used in campaigns against the Orthodox monopoly.

The “transformative effects” entrepreneurs had on politics, policies, and institutions (Sheingate 2003) described in the following chapters was the cumulative result of different actions that extended beyond formal political action. This does not exclude formal political action, as secular entrepreneurs included politicians or political activists who attempt to introduce formal change of existing rules. But, when actions in the formal political actions failed to achieve the desired results and trust in the political system declined, political action shifted elsewhere and new entrepreneurs appeared on stage. The transformative effects of this new secularization has nevertheless remained limited by several constraints. First, the ambivalent attitude of the majority of Israelis toward religion and the general desire for consensus discouraged a direct challenge to the existing rules of the game. Second, the conservatism and the narrow commitment to liberalism of some entrepreneurs and many of the nonreligious Israelis who take part in the process often led to partial solutions. Third, similarly, the market-based initiatives that dominated the contemporary era were, almost by nature, limited in their transformative motivations and potential as they were selective in appeal and often instrumental in their strategies.

## Secularization of Everyday Life

Secularization in Israel was described earlier as the decline of religious authority that may or may not be paralleled by changes of individual beliefs and identities, is independent from a secular-liberal worldview, and is uncommitted to a political struggle. In Israel, secularization as a process is driven both by secular-liberal ideology and by economic and demographic changes removed from ideology and, particularly, from liberalism. This multifaceted process includes various needs and demands that encounter both a stagnant political system and religious opposition. But, in spite of political

opposition and stagnation, secularization advanced through different processes and initiatives that were able to circumvent political confrontation.

Marriage can be secular Israelis' most significant encounter with religious authority. Rabbinical courts hold jurisdiction over matters of marriage and divorce for all Jews in Israel, regardless of their beliefs and preferences, and the rituals are conducted in accordance with Orthodox laws. Demands for reform made by secular Israelis who object to the Orthodox monopoly, and by those prevented from marrying in Israel by that monopoly, have gained in momentum and intensity in the past two decades. Until now, these demands have failed to change the formal rules, but the new needs and desires have been channeled into secular initiatives that have aimed at bypassing the political impasse. These included marriages conducted abroad, cohabitation and legal arrangements resulting in the growing number of "nontraditional" families, and families formed outside the rabbinate that may or may not bother to register their marriage through the state.

Death rituals and burial were not officially part of the status quo but became another part of the Orthodox monopoly in Israel, largely uninterrupted until the 1990s. The social, economic, and demographic changes described earlier also had influence on burials when, (p. 184) on one hand, FSU immigrants not recognized as Jews had nowhere to be buried and, on the other hand, secular Israelis demanded services compatible with their worldviews and rejected the uniform Orthodox service. Burial and funeral alternatives began to emerge as an answer to the immediate needs of immigrants and secular demands for new rituals and services and the freedom to choose the way they depart from their loved ones. Private cemeteries, profit oriented, which could hardly be imagined until recently, now provide a way for secular Israelis to avoid the Orthodox rabbinate and assume control over their departure from the world. The new alternatives created by secular entrepreneurs—motivated by ideology, profit, or a combination of both—provided a variety of burial and funeral services that would reflect the worldview of the deceased and the family, their aesthetic preferences or, in some cases, their status.

The Jewish *halakhic* prohibition on eating pork and raising pigs is an ancient and blanket ban. The pig is a forbidden food not only because it is identified as a repulsive animal but also because it signifies the persecution and humiliation of the Jews for many generations. In the early years of statehood, the majority of Jewish Israelis, including nonreligious ones, refrained from eating pork. The evolving status of nonkosher food in general, and of pork in particular, symbolizes—probably more than anything else—the new reality, according to which such meat, which had been sold in the past mostly under the counter and given the vague name "white steak," has now established a presence on the menu of many restaurants and is sold openly in new delicatessens and food chain stores throughout the country. Although the religious public, and most of the traditional



population in Israel, regard pork as a symbol of impurity, and for them eating it is a serious transgression, for many Israelis it is now a commodity judged by taste and price. The increasing legitimization and expansion of the nonkosher meat industry and the eating of pork constitute a fundamental change in the generally accepted lifestyle underscored by demographic and economic changes.

The declaration of the Sabbath as the official day of rest was one of the tenets of the status quo and, for many Israelis, also a principal expression of a Jewish state (Shaki 1995). The proliferation of commerce on the Sabbath (*Shabbat*, in Hebrew) is a marked indication of the erosion of the status quo and the growing rift between religious and nonreligious Israelis, who hold different interpretations of the Sabbath and different expectations regarding its public status. For religious people, the Sabbath is a day dedicated to prayer and family life, when commercial activity is strictly prohibited. For the nonreligious public, strongly influenced by consumer culture, the Sabbath has come to mean something entirely different, a day of rest and leisure, as the large crowds that visit shopping centers and restaurants on the Sabbath indicate. The use of the term “nonreligious” rather than “secular” is purposeful, as many of those who shop on the Sabbath would not identify themselves as secular and their other practices and values may not demonstrate secularism. The expansion of commerce on Sabbath can be explained as a direct outcome of the emergence of a consumer society in which shopping is not just for satisfying basic needs but is a cultural-leisure decision.

## Conclusion

Collective national identity in Israel, shared by religious and secular Jews, is deeply anchored in Jewish religion. This pertains not only to symbols and shared memories but also to the (p. 185) instrumental role religion performs in drawing boundaries and providing the legitimacy they require. Religion, in other words, continues to play a critical role in the definition of national boundaries translated into immigration laws, citizenship, and rights. Because it is difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish the (Jewish) nation from (Jewish) religion, the majority of nonreligious Israelis were (and still are) ambivalent toward religion and its role in public life as, on the one hand, it places limitations but, on the other hand, secures privileges. Consequently, many are suspicious of a secularism that seemingly threatens the secure boundaries of the Jewish state. It is hardly surprising that, in this context, secularism (an ideology related to liberalism) would be marginal and secularization (a process) could hardly challenge the status quo.

The secularization that took off in the late 1980s was different. This process, underpinned by economic and demographic changes, included new players, goals, and strategies that

responded to new needs and demands, as well as to the new opportunities that emerged. The decline of religious authority was not registered in formal changes in the status quo. Rather, it was new informal institutions and secularized spaces that provided alternatives by circumventing, rather than clashing with, religious authority.

Rules pertaining to religious monopoly largely remained in place, the privileges and rights of Orthodox Jews were protected, and religious parties' power did not diminish. Focusing, however, on the formal aspects of politics—lobbying, negotiation, and legislation—may miss important developments that take place elsewhere. Changes of preferences, initiatives, and choices, with or without political intent, may bring institutional change incrementally. Looking beyond the formal aspects of politics and political change, therefore, uncovers a dynamic reality. As this account of the secularization of Israel has demonstrated, ideology and political struggles explain only part of the changes that have occurred in the past two decades. Civil marriage, civil burial, shops selling pork, and the rapidly expanding commerce on the Sabbath are all evidence for a secularization process unfolding in Israel.

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