



Israel in Search of Identity





ISRAEL

IN SEARCH OF IDENTITY

Reading the Formative Years



nissim rejwan



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*The sight of human affairs deserve admiration and pity.
They are worthy of respect, too. And he is not insensible
who pays them the undemonstrative tribute of a sigh
which is not a sob, and of a smile which is not a grin.*

joseph conrad, *A Personal Record*





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PREFACE

*Some people may fear what the morrow will bring,
but I am afraid of what happened yesterday.*

Old Arab saying

Fifty years after its establishment, Israel continues to face the same basic problems and challenges it faced at its birth. These can be summed up under three interrelated headings: Israel's being accepted by its Arab neighbors; its succeeding in meaningfully integrating itself into its habitat; and the accommodation of its non-Jewish citizens by integrating them into Israeli society and polity. These three objectives are in turn closely related to Israel's intra-ethnic problem—the integration into its sociopolitical and economic fabric of that part of its Jewish population called variously Sephardic, Oriental, or Middle Eastern–North African.

In *Israel in Search of Identity*, an attempt is made to trace the roots of these and related problems back to the historical, cultural, religious, and intellectual backgrounds of those pioneers and founding fathers who had embraced the Zionist doctrine and subsequently set the tone for the new state ideologically and culturally as well as socially and politically. After probing these roots and their origins in the political cultures and the ethnic-nationalist ideologies of the pan-movements of nineteenth-century Eastern and Central Europe, ways and means are considered in which present-day Israelis can reappraise their attitudes and their possible future place in the Middle Eastern community of nations.

Part 1, "A Problem and Its Roots," opens with an introductory chapter in which Zionism's "Arab Doctrine" is historically and critically analyzed. An attempt is made here to show how the early Zionists' whole concept of "Arab" and of the Arab nationalist movement was a mirror image of their own perception of themselves, of their community, and of their movement—and that, consequently, the doctrine could not work.

Chapters 2 and 3 are devoted to an examination of the concepts of "nation" and "nationality" in both Zionist and pan-Arab perceptions. The idea



of an ethnic Jewish nationality is analyzed in the context of the question “Who is a Jew?” This is followed by a critical reading of the basic concepts of the Zionist ideology as they are reflected in the writings of Theodore Herzl, Peretz Smolenskin, Leo Pinsker, Ahad Ha-Am, and others.

Chapters 4 and 5—comprising part 2, “Prospects”—focus on the book’s central theme: Israel’s continuing search for identity—national, religious, and cultural. The subject of Jewish identity is examined in the light of what the author perceives as the three major identities that the Jews in their various environs acquired through the ages—the Middle Eastern/Sephardic, the European/Ashkenazic, and the West European/North American.

The meaning and the significance of the term “Jewish” as it is used in Israel today are probed critically, the author’s contention being that Judaism and “Jewish consciousness,” as they are taught, preached, and practiced by the basically secularist state apparatus, have been largely emptied of their contents. State-synagogue relations and their impact on Israeli society are treated in some detail.

The role of the Middle Eastern half of Israel’s Jewish population is examined in chapter 5, “Israel as an Open Society.” The argument is set forth that Israel cannot reasonably expect to integrate in an open, pluralist Middle East without itself becoming an open and genuinely pluralist society in which Jew and non-Jew, Ashkenazi and Oriental, orthodox and secularist can feel at home as equal citizens.

Part 3, “Middle Eastern Themes,” deals with two related subjects. In chapter 6, “Arab Nationalism and Pan-Arabism,” the Arab nationalist movement and its fortunes are examined in the light, among others, of Islam’s attitude to the nationality question and of the emergence of a distinct Palestinian identity that seems to repudiate the ethnic foundations of the ideology of pan-Arabism. Chapter 7, “East, West, and Other Vanities,” deals with the problem of the future “orientation” of Israeli culture and society and offers an exposé of what the author calls “the myth of Orientalization.” Also scrutinized is the subject of “cultural planning” and the calls made by Western-oriented Israeli academics and intellectuals for a “Western,” as against an “Eastern,” Israel.

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