Zionism and Jewish Identity

One of the landmark events of the past year in terms of Jewish identity was the publication of the survey of the religious and political values, attitudes, and identities of the Israeli population undertaken in 2014-2015 by the Pew Research Center. The survey, “Israel’s Religiously Divided Society,” provides a wealth of data on Israelis of all stripes; Jewish Israelis: Haredi (ultra-Orthodox), Dati (Orthodox Religious Zionist), Masorati (traditional with selective religious observance) and Hiloni (“secular” or non-observant), and Muslim, Christian, and Druse. But the survey’s interest goes beyond the data it provides. Crucially, it was conducted by Pew, a non-Israeli agency, which, in 2012-13, conducted a similar study of American Jews and thus affords a detailed, if not simple, comparison.

The survey was conducted by the Religious Research division of the Pew Research Center and the way that the survey was published and presented to the public highlights its character as a survey of religious attitudes, beliefs and behaviors – “Israel’s Religiously Divided Society.” We argue though, that what the survey measures and discloses is not so much “religion” and especially not religion in the American sense of individual beliefs and practices but rather alternative frameworks of Jewish collective identity or more precisely, the effects of the adoption of different frameworks of Jewish collective identity.

One can ask two basic questions of the Pew survey data: Do Jewish Israelis share the same basic conception and pattern of Jewish identity? Secondly: Do Jewish Israelis and Diaspora Jews share the same basic conception and pattern
of Jewish identity? We shall see that the Israeli Jewish population contains two very different conceptions and patterns of Jewish identity – that of the "secular" population (Hilonim) and that of everyone else – ultra-Orthodox, Orthodox, Religious Zionist, and Traditionalist. Secondly, the secular conception of Jewish identity differs considerably from the conception of Jewish identity expressed in the discourse of Jewish identification promoted by the organized Jewish community in the Diaspora.

The different frameworks of Jewish collective identity that the Pew data reflect are the result of the Zionist Revolution. Zionism, especially in its formative decades before the Second World War, was more than a movement to found a Jewish state (though especially from the late 1930s on that was its core component). Rather, it was a movement to reorder Jewish life, especially its pattern of collective identity. This was particularly true of the movements that bore the brunt of Zionist realization in Palestine-Eretz Yisrael – the various Labor Zionist movements. These movements, like other branches within Zionism, attempted to replace religion as the overarching authoritative framework of Jewish life and collective identity with a political national framework. Especially among the "secular" Zionist movements, this move was accompanied by the attempt to base Jewishness upon the "immanent frameworks" of language, political collective, and (to a certain extent) calendar, not upon religious ideals, aspirations, obligations or messianic hope. Thus, if one lives in the State of Israel and is a Hebrew speaking citizen of it, and especially if one fulfills one's citizenship duties in terms of military service and political participation, then one's life is Jewish. One need not fill it with any further content. One might even say that for the products of the Zionist revolution being Jewish is a framework, not a set of contents. It is a matter of participation in certain – Israeli, Hebrew – frameworks and not others (French, German, Polish). This is different from the assumptions of the discourse of Jewish identification in the organized American Jewish community in which being Jewish is a set of contents – religious beliefs and practice, support for Israel, Jewish learning etc.

We claim that the population group that calls itself Hiloni (generally translated as secular) is the group that carried out and underwent this revolution in the structure of Jewish collective identity. This revolution, though, remained incomplete. Other, Haredi or ultra-Orthodox groups in the Jewish population of Palestine-Eretz Yisrael objected vociferously to this program, including the very attempt to establish a Jewish national-political framework. Other groups attempted to reinterpret Jewish nationalism and to assimilate it (in one fashion or another) into the traditional...
the nature of Jewish identity, the Hilonim stand out in their understanding that Jewish identity is mainly a matter of national belonging and culture. Only 17 percent think that it has to do with religion at all. This is in stark contrast to all the other identity groups. Among the Haredim, 70 percent think it is solely a matter of religion and another 27 percent think it involves religion and national and cultural identity. Among the Datiim, 85 percent think it is either a matter of religion or a combination of religion and national identity; and even among Masoratim a clear majority (58 percent) think it is a matter of religion or a combination of religion and national belonging. The Hilonim also stand out dramatically in regard to how Israelis see the relationship between “Israeliness” and “Jewishness” as components of their collective identity. Again, it is only among the Hilonim that a clear majority (59 percent) see themselves as Israeli first and Jewish second. All the other groups – Haredim, Datiim and Masoratim – see themselves as Jewish first, by a large or clear majority. For Hilonim, being Israeli is the primary aspect of their collective identity, one might even say that being Israeli is their Jewish identity. It is important to stress that for most Hilonim being Israeli means being Jewish-Israeli. They do not include in their concept of Israeliness the Arab citizens of Israel.

Few Israelis say they have no religion, but for Hilonim Jewish religion does not define their Jewishness

Analysis of PEW Findings

Hilonim vs. Everybody Else

The Zionist revolutionary reordering of Jewish identity that characterizes the Hilonim, but not the other groups, is in sharp relief in the Pew survey results. Thus, in regard to the question of religious framework. Thus, the Pew data presents us with four identity categories – Hilonim, (“secular” or non-observant) Masoratim (“traditionalists”) Datiim and Haredim. Two of the groups represent the extremes – Hilonim and Haredim – and the other two represent the “means” or midway positions. Hilonim, who currently constitute 49 percent of the Israeli Jewish population, represent the population that actualized the Zionist Revolution, while the Haredim, currently 9 percent of the Jewish population, represent the group that opposed it. The middle groups – Datiim (13%) and Masoratim (29 percent) – represent groups who in one fashion or another reinterpret Jewish nationalism and assimilate it into the traditional-religious framework of Jewish identity. The detailed attitudes and values each group manifests, reflects the framework of Jewish collective identity they adopted. On many issues, Datiim and Masoratim side with the Haredim, but on others they are closer to the Hilonim. According to the Pew data, Jewish collective identity in Israel is dynamic; individuals may circulate among the various “stations” but the stations themselves remain stable.
For Hilonim, being "Jewish" in contrast refers to the traditional-Galuti-Diaspora mode of Jewish being, with which they don't identify and even reject. Hence it is secondary to their primary Jewish-Israeli identification.

However, it must be stressed that Hilonim, like all other Israeli Jews, feel Jewish pride and connection. Eighty-eight percent say they are proud to be Jewish, and 81 percent feel a strong sense of belonging to the Jewish people. (Among the other groups, both Jewish pride and Jewish belonging exceed 90 percent.) Yet this sense of connection seems to be related, at least in part, to the potential of every Jew to become an Israeli. Like the other groups, 98 percent of Hilonim agree that all Jews have the right to citizenship in Israel. At the same time, they seem to be less interested and connected to these Jews in their current state. In contrast to the other identity groups, only 43 percent of Hilonim feel a special responsibility to take care of Jews in need (at least 60 percent of Masoratim and Datiim; and 75 percent Haredim do).

As Pew points out, few Israelis say that they have no religion (p.66). This includes Hilonim. But the Jewish religion to which they adhere does not define their Jewishness. Hence, it is not very important. Only 2 percent of Hilonim see religion as very important. In contrast, a vast majority of Haredim and Datiim claim that religion is very important (96 and 85 percent respectively); and among Masoratim, 83 percent think it’s very or somewhat important (among Hilonim, only 19 percent think religion is somewhat important).

Not only do Hilonim think religion is not very important, only 28 percent of them think being Jewish is very important. Again, this is very different than among the other groups. Among Haredim and Datiim, over 90 percent think being Jewish is very important; 68 percent of Masoratim do. We suggest that this is the result of the fact that for Hilonim being Jewish aside from being Israeli does not carry much meaningful content, and of the "framework" nature of Jewish identity as national identity among Hilonim. Unlike in the Diaspora where Jewish identification has to be achieved (by going to synagogue, lighting Hanukkah candles, participating in a Salute to Israel Parade, etc.), being Jewish in Israel is a given by virtue of the political and linguistic framework in which one is immersed. If one were to change the framework (say by moving to New Zealand) one would change (over time) his national identity. Being Jewish for Hilonim is less a state that one strives for (and hence is "important"), and more of a given that is equivalent to other national identities that are also conferred through participation in political and linguistic frameworks. (That is, if they were in France they would be French. They happen to be in Israel so they are Jewish.)

To the extent that "being Jewish" is understood as an obligation one satisfies (and not a neutral given social fact), the one practice Hilonim do think is essential, and, hence, important to Jewishness is "remembering the Holocaust." Again, because they don't think of Jewish identification primarily as something that must be achieved, most Hilonim don't even think of living in Israel as essential to achieving Jewishness. Unlike the Datiim, of whom
54 percent answered that it is essential to being Jewish, and the Masoratim, of whom 42 percent thought so; only 23 percent of Hilonim thought that living in Israel is essential.

As we have argued, Haredim, Datiim and Masoratim did not experience the Zionist revolution at all, or did not undergo it in full, thoroughgoing manner. Hence the "syntax" they employ regarding Jewish identity is closer to the religious-traditional syntax and especially to the modern variant of the religious-traditional syntax employed in many of today’s Diaspora communities (especially in the U.S.). Hence, for all of these groups religion is a much more important component of Jewish identity than it is for Hilonim. Secondly, Israeliness is a realization of Jewishness, not a replacement or a translation of it. As a result, all these groups are Jewish first and then Israeli. Thirdly, for these groups Jewishness is an ideal and an aspiration not a neutral social fact. Hence, in order to be Jewish one has to do something – lead an ethical life, observe Jewish law, live in Israel, remember the Holocaust, etc. – and being Jewish is something very important. Because Hilonim largely do not think of being Jewish as an ideal or aspiration, but rather as a given within the political framework, they do not think of any of these sets of practices as essential to being Jewish (with the pianissimo exception of remembering the Holocaust.)

Again, the Haredim, Datiim and Masoratim did not fully undergo the Zionist revolution in Jewish collective identity. However, it is the Haredim who have explicitly rejected this reordering, and, in fact, have waged ideological war against it. This, we think, explains Haredi "Anti-Zionism." While this is a well-known characteristic of the Haredim, we do not think that it is generally understood correctly. On one hand most Haredim are nationalistic in the sense of support for Jewish empowerment and settlement in, and control of, the Land of Israel. They have willingly participated in right-wing, nationalistic governing coalitions for the last 40 years. Nevertheless, they have historically rejected (and continue to do so) the label and the concept of "Zionism" and they reject, to one degree or another, the symbols of the state and do not participate in the rituals of its civic culture. This was evident in the Pew survey. Only a third of Haredim say that the term "Zionist" very accurately or somewhat accurately describes them (only 9 percent very accurately). In every other group at least two thirds say that the term accurately describes them.

It would seem that what the Haredim mean by the fact that they are not "Zionists" is that they emphatically reject the Zionist revolution in regard to collective identity and its ramifications. That is, they totally reject the idea that one can be Jewish simply by belonging to a Jewish political collectivity or by speaking Hebrew. (It is well to recall here the remark of R. Mordecai Alter, the Gerer Rebbe in the first half of the 20th century, concerning the halutzim of Kibbutz Ein Harod: "Hebrew speaking goyim.") Thus, over 90 percent of the Haredim answered that being Jewish is mainly a matter of religion. The Religious Zionists (Datiim) and the Masoratim do not reject the Zionist label because to them "Zionism" is also a means of realizing or fulfilling the religious
dimensions of Judaism. The Haredim do not countenance such tepid latitudinarianism. Like Cardinal Newman, who claimed that there only two paths – that of the Catholic Church (“Rome”) or atheism, the Haredim also basically feel that there are only two paths – that of “Torah-true Judaism” or “Zionism.” Thus when Hilonim and Haredim change their group affiliation or “cross-over,” they most often go from one extreme to the other. If Hilonim become religious, they most often become Haredim – not religious Zionists – and if Haredim leave their framework, for the most part, they become Hilonim.

Political and social collectivities are in part defined by how authority is distributed in them and to whom. If you define the Jewish collectivity as being political-national in nature, then political needs and goals carry the most weight and political leadership carries the most authority. However, if you continue to define the Jewish people as a religious-traditional collectivity, then religious goals become most important and the religious leadership is the most authoritative. This issue seems to be evident in one of the questions Pew highlighted: “If there is a contradiction between democratic principles and Jewish religious law, what should take precedence?”

Here again, the Haredim and the Hilonim are mirror images of each other. Eighty-nine percent of Hilonim say that democratic principles should take precedence; the same number, 89 percent, of Haredim say that religious law should take precedence. The Hiloni position seems to reflect not only adherence to democratic principles, but also the privileging of the national-political framework over the religious one. The Haredim, in contrast, insist that the overarching framework of the Jewish people remains a religious-traditional one, hence the Halacha takes precedence.

The mutually exclusive polar opposite natures of the Haredim and Hilonim is also expressed in their social relations. The vast majority of both Haredim and Hilonim opposes intermarriage between their two communities. Ninety-five percent of Haredim say that they would be “not too,” or “not at all” comfortable if their child married a Hiloni, and 93 percent of Hilonim say the same with respect to the Haredim. Hilonim are more uncomfortable with the prospect of their children marrying Haredim than with the prospect of their children marrying Christians.

Israeli Hilonim are not really opposed to religion, they just don’t want it to define what being Jewish is, and they don’t want it or its representatives to be the decisive authority in Jewish life. Thus many Hilonim observe some religious practices and to one degree or another hold religious beliefs, and they do so to an extent that is higher than that of non-Orthodox Jews in America. Thus, a third (33 percent) of Hilonim keep kosher (22 percent of all American Jews keep kosher, 7 percent of Reform Jews. Eighty-seven percent of Hilonim attend a Passover Seder of some sort, which is much higher than for the American Jewish population (70 percent); 67 percent do not eat pork; 80 percent
light Hanukkah candles; 30 percent fast on Yom Kippur; and 60 percent, to one degree or another, believe in God.

At the same time, they are emphatically opposed to religion being an authoritative structure and hence they are also distanced from, or opposed to, the institutional aspect of religion. Eighty-eight percent say that religion should be kept separate from government policies (80 percent or more of Datiim and Haredim believe that government policies should promote religious values and beliefs), and 60 percent never attend synagogue. Again, for Hilonim being Jewish is something that emerges from the immanent political and linguistic frameworks; hence 44 percent think that Jewish education, that is, education that teaches specific Jewish content, is not important.

While Hilonim in some fashion keep some traditional religious practices and beliefs, their attitudes are clearly differentiated from that of self-identified Israeli traditionalist Jews (Masoratim). Israeli traditionalist Jews (who are not strictly observant), in regard to many questions, hold attitudes that are midway between those of religious Orthodox Jews (Haredim and Datiim) and Hilonim, and tend more to endorse traditional authority and gender roles. Thus, 44 percent of Masoratim support shutting down public transportation on Shabbat, while only 6 percent of Hilonim do (among Datiim and Haredim, at least 85 percent do). And 70 percent of Masoratim oppose allowing Reform and Conservative rabbis to perform marriages, whereas only 28 percent of Hilonim oppose this. Furthermore, 58 percent of Masoratim believe that government policies should promote religious values and beliefs, a position that only 8 percent of Hilonim endorse. In other words, Hilonim and Masoratim are two very different groups whose behavior may overlap here and there, but represent two different underlying worldviews regarding the nature of the Jewish people and its framework of authority. The Hilonim have undergone the Zionist revolution, while the Masoratim may be considered the "left wing" of those who have not, and even objected to it.

The Hilonim also have distinctive political views. In regard to many political and constitutional issues they stand opposed to the other three groups and they are the only group that contains a subgroup that defines itself as being "left." It is also the only group that contains subgroups that support "leftist" or more universalist political positions. Thus, in regard to the question that made headlines – "Do you agree or disagree with the statement ‘Arabs should be expelled or transferred from Israel,’" 58 percent of Hilonim disagreed. Among all the other groups a majority agreed. Again, a slim majority of Hilonim (56 percent) agreed that a peaceful two-state solution to the Israel-Palestinian conflict is possible. Among all the other groups, a majority disagreed. Furthermore, Hilonim are the only group with a substantial number of members willing to self-identify as "Left" – 14 percent. Among the other groups the number was

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negligible (1-3 percent). We get a sort of mirror image when we look at people who identify as “right”: Among Haredim, Datiim, and Masoratim, about half the population identified as right; the other half, center. Among Hilonim only 24 percent identified as right and 62 percent identified as center. We have seen above that 89 percent of Hilonim agree that democratic principles should be given preference if there is a contradiction between them and the Jewish religious law.

Interpreting this, it would seem that Hilonim have a greater tendency to adopt universalist (as opposed to particularist) orientations. Following the implications of the Zionist Revolution in regard to collective identity, they tend not to believe that there is a deep (ontological or other) difference between Jews and non-Jews. What makes people Jewish is their participation in a Jewish political and linguistic framework. Such frameworks are not, in principle, different from similar frameworks among non-Jews. This orientation may be partially responsible for the high rates of assimilation and intermarriage among Israeli Jews when they go abroad. Nevertheless, there are limits to universalism among Hilonim. Sixty-nine percent think that Jews should be given preferential treatment in the State of Israel. It would seem that some of this is due to their understanding of Israel as a Jewish state, which should promote Jewish interests.

"Absolute Hilonim" and "Somewhat Traditional Hilonim"

The Pew study only employs one single category – "Hilonim," so it is difficult to know whether they constitute an undifferentiated category or whether there are differences between Hilonim who observe more or fewer religious practices. The Jewish People Policy Institute Israeli Pluralism Survey, though, created two categories in regard to Hilonim: “Absolute Hilonim” who constitute 30.4 percent of the sample, and “Somewhat Traditional Hilonim” who constitute 20.8 percent. The two groups together make up 51 percent of the sample, which is close to the size of the Hiloni group the Pew Study found (49 percent). It stands to reason that many or most of the Hilonim who observe religious practices such as lighting Shabbat Candles or keeping Kosher in the Pew study would belong to the Somewhat Traditional Hilonim group in the JPPI survey. The JPPI survey also contained a significant number of attitude questions; it turns out that the Somewhat Traditional Hilonim were a bit more conservative-traditional in their answers than the Absolute Hilonim. At the same time, in a manner that is congruent with the Pew study, in the JPPI, Survey the Somewhat Traditional Hilonim are also differentiated from the Masoratim group. The former being more liberal-secular than the latter. Thus, the three groups form something of a continuum moving from right to left – Masoratim are the most conservative-traditional, then comes the Somewhat Traditional Hilonim, and finally the most secular-liberal are the Absolute Hilonim. The groups also differ in their demographic characteristics. Forty-five percent of the
Masoratim are from the Middle East and North Africa (Mizrachim), double their size in the sample as a whole. At the same time, immigrants from the FSU make up 21.7 percent of the Absolute Hilonim. This percentage is 75 percent larger than their size in the sample as a whole.

The attitudes of the three groups in relation to nine attitude questions are presented in the following pie charts.

These pie charts show that the Somewhat Traditional Hilonim hold positions that are between those of the Masoratim and the Absolute Hilonim. Yet they also show that the Somewhat Traditional Hilonim basically hold policy positions that are similar to those of the Absolute Hilonim, albeit with somewhat less conviction or greater ambivalence. Thus, in regard to civil marriage, over three quarters of the Absolute Hilonim fully agree that civil marriage should be possible in Israel. Together with those that somewhat agree that civil marriage should be introduced, those that support civil marriage constitute almost seven eighths of the Absolute Hilonim group. A similar number of support for civil marriage is reached for Somewhat Traditional Hilonim if you add together those who "fully agree" that civil marriage should be introduced with those who "somewhat agree." In that case, a bit over three quarters support civil marriage. In contrast, among Masoratim, even if you add "fully agree" and "somewhat agree," less than three quarters support civil marriage, and less than half fully agree that it should be instituted.

The situation is similar in regard to the question whether one would want non-Jewish children
to attend his or her children’s school. Among Absolute Hilonim, almost half fully agreed and almost three quarters either fully or somewhat agreed. Among Somewhat Traditional Hilonim, less than half fully agreed but about five in eight fully or somewhat agreed, again a percentage that is close to that of the Absolute Hilonim, but with less conviction. Among Masoratim, less than a quarter fully agreed, and less than half fully or somewhat agreed.

An Integration among Israeli Jews

According to the Pew Report Hilonim are about half (49 percent) of the Jewish population of Israel. We have seen that in fundamental ways, their worldview, especially regarding the Jewish people and religion, culture, and tradition differs from the more traditionally oriented population sectors. They are also prominently (some would say, hegemonically) represented among Israeli elites and in the reality-defining professions of media, law, arts, and academics. Such a population profile is indeed behind the cultural and political “wars” that characterize Israeli society.

Yet, the Israeli Jewish population also contains mechanisms of integration. One very important factor in this regard is the Masorati population. While the Masorati population resembles the Dati and Haredi populations in terms of basic worldview, they very much overlap with Hilonim when it comes to behavior. Like the Hilonim, they are not strictly observant religiously and participate in leisure activities on Shabbat, such as going to the beach and attending soccer games. In their norms of dress and mixing of the sexes they also resemble Hilonim. Furthermore, in some of their attitudes, especially those related to their own personal freedom, they are closer to Hilonim than to the strictly religious groups. Thus, 79 percent oppose gender segregation on public transportation used by Haredim (93 percent of Hilonim oppose it), and 57 percent oppose, and only 37 percent of Masoratim support, Halacha becoming the law of the land. In other words, on many levels the Masoratim are a sort of bridge between Jewish population groups in Israel. Furthermore, the fact that the Hilonim are divided into “Absolute Hilonim” and "Somewhat Traditional Hilonim" also means, that to a certain extent, Israeli society is not characterized solely by a dichotomy of the Hilonim vs. everyone else, but by a continuous spectrum. Religious gradually shades off into secular. To the left of the Orthodox stand the Masoratim, who as we have seen, are still rather conservative and traditional. Next to them are the "Somewhat Traditional Hilonim" who are less traditional and more pluralistic. At the end of the spectrum we have the Absolute Hilonim who are maximally pluralistic and not traditional.

Another integrating factor is the mobility between the various groups, especially the two middle groups: Datiim and Masoratim. About 9 percent of those raised Dati or Masorati no longer belong to those groups (There has been relatively little
switching out of the Haredi camp). The Datiim have gained 2 percent of their numbers from other groups and the Masoratim have gained 10 percent. Four percent of those raised Hilonim are no longer so, but 8 percent of their numbers are new arrivals. Thus, it would seem that Datiim become Masoratim and Masoratim become Hilonim: The 9% of those raised as Masoratim who have left were replaced by Datiim who became Masoratim. That group that left the Masorati camp largely became Hilonim. The fact that Israeli Jews in the course of their lives are “religiously mobile” is an integrating factor promoting understanding between the groups and maintaining social connections.

**Israeli Jews and American Jews**

This identity profile of the Israeli Jewish population can illuminate the relations between American and Israeli Jews. On one hand, the population group that most closely resembles the majority American Jewish population in terms of lifestyle, income, social class, educational attainment, occupational status, and political orientation – the Hilonim – has very different assumptions about Jewish identity from the organized American Jewish community. In contrast, there are other groups whose assumptions concerning Jewish identity resemble those of the organized American Jewish community – the Masoratim, Datiim and Haredim. Like the organized American Jewish community, these groups think of Jewish identity as being constituted by content, and its realization involves doing or achieving something (saying Psalms, praying, going on a pilgrimage to a Holy site or individual, supporting settlement in the Greater Land of Israel, studying Torah or Jewish sources). However, these groups are, for the most part, very different from the American Jews who make up the majority of the American organized Jewish community in terms of life style and political orientation and to a certain extent also in income and social class, educational attainment and occupational status.

The organized American Jewish community is bothered by the fact that the Israeli Jews with whom they have the most contact and most in common, do not seem to be concerned with Jewish identity in the same way they are. Thus, they fund a plethora of programs that promote Jewish identity and the teaching of the “Jewish bookshelf” to secular Israelis in Israel. While these programs are interesting and attractive, they are mainly today marginal to Israeli life and culture. In order for these programs to have more effect they should engage secular Israelis and the creators and American sponsors of these programs in dialogue concerning the different meanings and assumptions of Jewish identity.
Endnotes

1 Not to be confused with the Masorati movement which is the Israeli name for the American Conservative movement. We are not speaking about American Conservative Jews but of Israeli Jews mainly of North African and the Middle Eastern origin who selectively observe the religious tradition and have a religious outlook and belief system.


3 It is likely that Haredim have a somewhat different understanding of "Jews in need" than other Jews and of the aid that they require.

4 Pre-Modern Jewish identity for the most part regarded Jewishness as both something given (ascribed) and as something achieved.

5 גוים ואס רעונות העבריים.”