



THE JEWISH PEOPLE POLICY INSTITUTE
המכון למדיניות העם היהודי

Israeli Television A Global Perspective

The Reception and Impact of Israeli Drama Series
in the Jewish World and Beyond

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An original project of the Jewish People Policy Institute
(Established by the Jewish Agency for Israel, Ltd.) (CC)
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Credits for cover photos: *Fauda*: Nati Levi | *Shtisel*: Ohad Romano
Our Boys: Keshet 12, HBO, and Movie Plus Cover,
Graphic Design and Production: Lotte Design

Printed and distributed by JPPI

ISBN: 978-965-7549-33-9

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Foreword

The global image of the State of Israel is shaped both by its involvement in an ongoing violent conflict with the Palestinians, and by its status as a high-tech hub of entrepreneurship and innovation – the "Start-Up Nation." This image is, of course, based on fact, but it sells us short: Israel is home to a complex, dynamic society whose civic agenda is fascinating, rich, and particularly bustling.

The study before us presents an important aspect of Israeli society – the bountiful culture that flourishes here, which the world is beginning to recognize and consume. Israel is not just a Sparta living by the sword, or a microchip paved Silicon Valley, but also a significant source of diverse cultural creation. One aspect of Israel's cultural abundance and originality – its television series – is the subject of this research study by Dr. Gitit Levy-Paz.

Israeli television drama series have been exported with great success around the world, especially in the United States. The study examines their influence as Israeli "soft power" in its relations with the West. The programs portray Israel, and aspects of its special character as a Jewish state, as credible and convincing in the eyes of non-Israelis. The lens through which the rest of the world usually looks at us – the lens of the "conflict" – is being replaced by another one, through which Israeli society is portrayed as it is – alive and kicking, impressive and struggling.

The success of these serials in reshaping Israel's image stems from the fact that they are not intended as "public relations." Their purpose is first and foremost economic and artistic. Their soft-power value is a side effect of the artistic endeavor. Indeed, some of the shows criticize aspects of the Israeli reality, but the study argues that there is no flaw in this. On the contrary, the open and sometimes painful discourse enables the international audience a genuine

connection to the Israeli experience; it also communicates the crucial fact that Israel is an open society with a free market of opinions.

This study addresses the proper policy with respect to government support for cultural activity, and grapples with the fascinating questions raised by the coupling of the words "cultural policy." The author's strong recommendation is that cultural funders – the state and philanthropic foundations – refrain from any intervention in the professional sphere of creative work.

The study was written within the framework of the Jewish People Policy Institute, among other things, because the drama series play an important role in the relationship between the two parts of the Jewish people – Israel and the Diaspora. In recent years we have, unfortunately, experienced a distancing, which sometimes amounts to mutual alienation, between Israelis and parts of Western Jewry. The study shows that the series have important potential in preserving bridges and cultivating the identification of the Jews of the world with Israel. They do not obscure the political, cultural, and religious controversies that characterize the relationship between the two parts of the people, but their credibility allows for a more sensitive understanding and an even greater identification of Western liberal Judaism with the Israeli experience – as it is, in the here and now. Interestingly, the study also notes the potential of the series to expose Israeli Jews to the life and culture of Diaspora Jews. Every bridge, as we know, spans two ends.

Congratulations and thanks to Dr. Gitit Levy-Paz for her important, largely pioneering work.

Prof. Yedidia Stern, President

The Jewish People Policy Institute

Introduction

In recent years, technological and artistic developments have reinforced television's status as an important and powerful cultural medium. Television has gone digital and global, and the international market offers TV series from a wide array of countries and cultures. Israel has become one of the preeminent players in the worldwide television industry. The international success of Israeli dramatic series constitutes yet another chapter in the story of Israeli entrepreneurship – an expansion of that entrepreneurial spirit into the cultural sphere. Many Israeli programs have been sold to foreign networks and are broadcast the world over. The most notable of these are *Fauda* and *Shtisel*, which have garnered broad acclaim the world over. These and other series are bringing different aspects of Israeli life to Jewish and non-Jewish audiences and are having an impact on their viewers' knowledge of Israel, and their attachment to it.

The issue of Israel-Diaspora relations, and particularly of American Jews' sense of connection to Israel, has attracted considerable attention over the past decade. Numerous studies, including papers and articles published by the Jewish People Policy Institute,¹ have explored the topic. Among other things, the claim that American Jewry is distancing itself, or even disconnecting, from Israel has been addressed. The success of the Israeli dramatic series provides a new angle from which to examine the issue. This study will look at whether Israeli series affect Jewish viewers' sense of connection and emotional attachment to Israel, and their position vis-a-vis Israel. If such effects exist, what is their nature and their implications?

It is important to note that activities and programs whose main purpose is to strengthen ties between distant communities (e.g., Taglit-Birthright and MASA) were disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. In this context, Israeli television dramas, at least to some degree, are a solace and a source of Jewish-Israeli

content that connects Diaspora Jews to Israel and Jewish communities to each other – despite the restrictions and physical distance. Here the importance of social media comes to the fore, as we shall see, with dedicated Facebook groups serving as vehicles for discussion and learning about the programs – and, indirectly, about Jewish identity, the Jewish people, and Israel.

Beyond Jewish identity, community connections and Jewish attachment to Israel, the drama series also have large non-Jewish audiences. Some of these viewers get their first glimpse of Israeli life as mediated by the programs. Learning/study of this kind also refers to another major quality of the series – their function as a "window" into Israeli reality and the Jewish people. In this sense, the shows constitute a source of Israeli and Jewish "soft power." This is a complicated issue having to do with the images and representations offered by the programs, as well as with the nature of the series as artistic creations, particularly in an era when quality television shows compete successfully with cinema and are considered to be works of art in their own right. Thus, our discussion of the images, the representations, and the way in which the drama series "represent" Israel, will address not only the perception and function of the programs as Israeli "soft power," but also the questions of whether and how the concept of soft power should be examined in this context.

Israel's representation in the series is related to another salient issue that will be explored here. Although this study focuses on the impact of Israeli television on non-Israeli viewers (primarily Jews), the series are also connected with a "revolutionary" development within the sphere of Israeli dramatic programming. This development relates primarily to deep-seated social change in Israel over the last few decades. Today's Israeli drama series also represent major trends and developments in Israeli society. This study will look at these developments and consider the TV shows as a mirror that compellingly reflects Israeli society. The Jewish People Policy Institute's Israeli Society Index 2020 highlights cross-sectional and deep-seated trends; the present work will direct our gaze to fictional representations of the parameters included in the Index,

especially with regard to the Haredi and the Arab sectors, which have "starred" in many of today's most successful Israeli dramas.

The study comprises two parts. The first section will provide a brief, necessary background beginning with a discussion of the history of Israeli public television broadcasting and its characteristics. This will be followed by background on the rise of such successful series as *Fauda* and *Shtisel*, with an overview of the history of original Israeli serial dramas. Social and cultural developments that have arisen in Israel will be discussed – a discussion that is important if we are to understand the unique representations that feature in current Israeli programs, particularly the image and representation of Israel itself. The second, central part of the study will look at the reception of the series by, and their impact on, foreign viewers, especially American Jews. The study will conclude with a summary and a set of policy recommendations.

An important note about the choice of the serial dramas examined in the study: The study, as a whole, addresses a new phenomenon – the global success of Israeli drama series, that is, of Israeli programs that have been sold and aired abroad. In order to focus the discussion and sharpen its insights, the study concentrates on three specific series: *Fauda*, *Shtisel*, and *Our Boys* (HaNe'arim). *Fauda* and *Shtisel* are the first series to have been sold as Hebrew-language Israeli shows broadcast with subtitles, and both have garnered considerable international success. *Our Boys* is interesting for its difficult and complex content. Together, the three dramas represent different facets of the same phenomenon, thereby promoting achievement of the research goals.

Research Questions

The following questions are central to the study:

- A. What are the major representations and content of the drama series, and how do they reflect trends and developments in the social discourse regarding Israel and Israeliness today?
- B. What factors lie behind the reception and international success of the series?
- C. How have the Israeli serial dramas broadcast abroad affected viewers² with regard to:
 - Level of knowledge about Israel;
 - Connection and attachment to Israel;
 - Jewish knowledge and study;
 - Jewish identity and identification;
 - Unity and polarization within the American-Jewish community.
- D. Do the serials contribute to Israeli and Jewish soft power, and if so, how?

Methodology

This study is based on qualitative content analysis, both of the serial dramas and of articles and critical pieces published about them. Another major source of material for the study was posts and discussion threads in the international Facebook groups dedicated to *Shtisel* and *Fauda*. These are lively, active groups; each month dozens to hundreds of posts are published on them. The largest of the groups, *Shtisel* – Let’s Talk About It, has over 33,000 members, while the smallest, *Shtisel* Discussion Group, has 6,000 members.³ The groups are global in scope, with participants from North America, Australia, Africa, Germany, the Netherlands, and Israel. The *Fauda* group even includes members from Arab countries such as Lebanon, Egypt, Tunisia, and others. These groups are a crucial information source; many hundreds of posts were read and analyzed as part of the research process.

A 20-part questionnaire on the research topic was administered via relevant social media platforms.⁴ A total of 517 viewers responded to the questions, all of them from North America. This was not a representative sample of the American audience as a whole, or of the American-Jewish population in particular. However, the information gathered provides an additional, anecdotal perspective on the programs’ audiences and impact. Most of the respondents – 420 – were American Jews, and most had a meaningful connection to their Jewish identity and to Israel. Ninety-seven respondents were non-Jewish Americans. The survey respondents acted on a post published in a number of Facebook groups, mainly fan-based or academic in orientation; some respondents acted on the reposts of friends in the American-Jewish community.

Summary of Research Findings

Television Drama Series: A Mirror of Israeli Society

Complex representations of Israeli society

Since the 1990s, technological, regulatory, and economic developments have generated a revolution in Israel's media market – including television. At the same time, social developments have led to a revolution in the representations and content in Israeli drama series. The change has upended paradigms and basic assumptions regarding Israeli society and identity. Ideas about trauma and victimhood are now being handled very differently, and there has been a major erosion of the "ambassador" paradigm in which cultural productions are designed to portray Israel in the best possible light. This approach imposes a duty on the artist to act as an Israeli envoy, at home and particularly abroad. New depictions of Israeliness, and especially of the social/cultural "other," are now treated with a complexity and authenticity that hadn't been seen before on Israeli television. In contrast to the exemplary image of Israel once deemed necessary to convey – of heroism and solidarity – today's Israeli television programs (also) expose raw nerves and reveal wounds. They do not shy away from the price that being Israeli exacts from the individual and the general public.

The rise of the periphery and its penetration into the cultural and Israeli center

Alongside these more candid, complex, and critical representations of "Israel" and its myriad facets, the drama series also reflect the rise of Israel's geographic and social periphery and its penetration into the Israeli cultural consciousness. Many protagonists are Haredim and Arabs, two of Israeli society's most

conspicuous minorities. Haredi and Arab portrayals have undergone a complete metamorphosis, from vague stereotypes to full and authentic characterizations. Many of the series play up cultural similarities between "Israeliness" and "Arabness." Arabs, even when portrayed as bitter enemies, are also shown as sharing a culture or cultural markers with Israelis. These insights illustrate that the programs reflect trends and processes pertaining to identity and Israeli society.

International Success

BeTipul (In Treatment), picked up by HBO in 2006, was the first Israeli drama series sold to a foreign network. A decade later, in 2016, *Fauda* was sold to Netflix – another, though not the only, milestone along the Israeli television community's path to success in the international TV market. Between 2006 and late 2020, over 70 Israeli formats were sold to American television outlets. Several Israeli drama series have found large international audiences in their original (subtitled) formats (*Fauda*, *Shtisel*, *Tehran*). Remakes of other Israeli series (*Euphoria*, *Your Honor*, *The Greenhouse*, and others) have also enjoyed significant international popularity.

The Israeli programs *Fauda*, *Our Boys*, and *Shtisel* appeared in a New York Times list of the 30 best foreign series of the past decade, and the Israeli series *Prisoners of War* was first in the rankings⁵. It was sold to 20th Century Fox Television in 2009 and remade into the highly rated American series *Homeland*.

Shtisel and *Fauda* have proven to be the Israeli blockbusters. Both have active international Facebook groups with thousands of admirers. Most months, hundreds of posts appear in these groups. The largest group, "*Shtisel* – Let's Talk About It" – has more than 33,000 members from all parts of the globe. It is worth noting that a *Fauda* group includes viewers from Arab and Muslim countries such as Lebanon, Egypt, Tunisia, and others. (In 2020 during the month of Ramadan, in the midst of the Corona-19 pandemic, *Fauda* garnered

first place on the Netflix Top Ten list in Lebanon, third place in the UAE, and sixth place in Jordan). Two recently launched streaming services featuring primarily Israeli and Jewish content also target foreign audiences. One of them, Izzy, an Israeli streaming service airs programs about Israeli society and Jewish and Israeli history. The other, Chaiflicks, offers films about Israel and Judaism. These streaming services are yet another illustration of the success of Israeli programming, and of a growing worldwide demand for Israeli/Jewish content.

The secret of positive reception abroad: truths that are stranger than fiction and portrayed in a complex manner

Life in Israel contains no shortage of conflict: a young Jewish state in the heart of the Middle East coping with multiple national, political, religious, ethnic, and economic clashes and rifts. When such realities are translated to the screen in a professional manner, with sensitivity and concern for authenticity, they "touch the hearts" of viewers seeking complex and realistic dramatic programming. The international acclaim enjoyed by Israeli programs can be attributed to various developments in the Israeli television industry: increased professionalism, the creation of quality dramas, and political/social developments that have seeped into the culture making it possible to take a more complex view of Israeli life – in all its aspects and with all of its troubles. The international audience, like the Israeli audience, finds this new complexity in the depiction of the Israeli reality attractive. In the past, Israeli film and television romanticized the heroic and portrayed a black and white view of the Israeli experience; are no longer well received. Viewers have trouble identifying with simplistic or absolutist messages. **It turns out that Israeli reality and, in particular, the complex and richly nuanced depiction of that reality on screen, are major factors in the success of these drama series abroad.**

Learning and knowledge: the impact of Israeli television on viewers' knowledge of Israel, Judaism, and the Jewish people

Knowledge of Israel: Although these dramatic series are fictional, the programs also constitute a source of knowledge and a means of learning about Israel. Some viewers encounter Israel for the first time via these shows and are introduced to stories about Israelis and the various aspects of life in Israel. For other, primarily Jewish, viewers already acquainted with Israel, these shows offer encounters with a familiar reality at differing intensity levels (depending on the viewer, the program, etc.). As one Canadian Jewish viewer noted, the series provide a richer and more complex encounter with Israeli life than news reports, which are often incomplete and superficial. The active Facebook fan groups, in which varied discussions take place about the shows and about Israel, provide a supportive complementary social and educational platform.

Jewish learning: Beyond the opportunity to learn about Israel, the series offer Jewish educational opportunities and sociocultural insights pertaining to Jews and Judaism. Jewish learning may be defined as the reading and exegesis of sources and texts from the Jewish bookshelf. The shows provide a variation of that kind of learning, by raising moral dilemmas within a Jewish context. At the same time, the series certainly constitute sources for sociocultural encounters with Jews and Judaism. Many viewers are exposed to a religion – and its traditions – that differs from their own. Here too, the Facebook groups are platforms for Jewish learning and for discussion about Jews and Judaism.

The series affect viewers' sense of attachment to, and attitudes toward, Israel

Connection: Viewing the programs strengthens the emotional attachment of American Jews to Israel. Regarded as an element of Jewish identity, emotional attachment to it Israel is meaningful and important to many Jews. The data

that emerged from our survey showed that, for Jews who are attached to Israel and regard it as a significant identity element, the shows provide a meaningful vehicle for conducting their relationship with Israel and have an intensifying effect on that relationship. Regarding Jews who are less "connected" to Israel and to their Jewishness, the conclusions are less statistically significant, though it appears that even Jewish viewers with little or no emotional attachment to Israel, the programs strengthen their connection to Israel. Among Jews who are not very knowledgeable about Israel, viewing the series has a significant impact and enhances their connection to Israel. In any case, and with regard to all of the groups surveyed, it was found that the programs had either a positive effect or no effect at all, but no negative effect: no weakening or impairment of viewers' sense of connection to Israel was found to have resulted from watching the shows.

Attitudes: Viewing the Israeli series may also have an impact on viewer attitudes regarding Israel. While viewer "attachment" relates primarily to the emotional sphere and to the degree of connection to Israel, viewer "attitudes" relates to the sphere of reason: the viewer's agreement or disagreement with Israeli governmental policies, political outlook, and general ideology. The survey findings indicate that it is harder to influence viewer attitudes than the sense of attachment. However, a sizeable group, nearly half of the Jewish viewers, said that watching the shows had had a positive effect on their attitudes. Negative impact on attitudes was negligible. Among Jews unfamiliar with, and possessing little knowledge about, Israel, the effect on attitudes is more substantial than among knowledgeable Jews. Those who have no emotional attachment – who do not care about Israel – generally do not change their opinions about Israel in response to the series.

The data obtained on the positive impact of the drama series, especially on the sense of attachment to Israel and, to a lesser degree, on attitudes regarding Israel, are of great significance. This is particularly evident with regard to distancing/disconnection from Israel trends among American Jews. It appears that the programs, and the act of watching them, may serve as a

positive counterforce against these trends. It is true that the act of viewing the shows mainly strengthens connections that are "already strong," those who are already connected to Israel and for whom the series are yet another vehicle for reinforcing the relationship. However, studies⁶ show that the phenomenon of the "shrinking Jewish middle" – has been accelerating in recent years, and that fortifying and preserving it is very important. The "shrinking Jewish middle" refers to the migration of the "strong" center of "connected" Jews to the extremes of orthodoxy or assimilation. **The Israeli television programs can be added to the basket of policy measures oriented toward preserving the Jewish identity of the "middle."**

It was also found that the series have a considerable impact on Jews with little or no connection to Israel – Jews for whom concern for Israel is not a major element of their Jewish identity, and especially Jews who are unfamiliar with Israel (knowledge, visits, residence). Although these findings are for the most part preliminary, they encourage further research. Having an impact on Jews in various degrees of distancing and/or disconnection from Israel and Judaism is important, and more in-depth research is warranted regarding the scope and nature of the programs' impact.

The survey also examined how the series affect non-Jewish viewers. For this group, the effect on attitudes was almost equally divided between no effect, and positive effect. However, it is important to note that this group comprised a small minority of the respondents; accordingly, the recommendation is to devote a separate study to non-Jewish viewers.

Jewish Identity

Viewing the series has a strengthening effect on Jewish identity. Here as well, the impact is more substantial among viewers whose Jewish identity is already strong. However, even among those with a thin Jewish identity a considerable impact was found. In general, and as with attitudes toward Israel, the effect on Jewish identity is smaller than the effect on **attachment to Israel, which is the central impact parameter with regard to viewing the programs.**

The programs as a response to a Jewish-identity need

Watching these shows answers a Jewish identity need for continuous contact with Israel. American Jews have always sought different avenues for maintaining contact with Israel, e.g., trips, temporary residence, bat/bar mitzvah ceremonies, personal and business relationships, donations, and more. Viewing the programs is a convenient, pleasant, and inexpensive option for this kind of contact. Although Israel is perceived as a central and meaningful place for the Jewish people, in American-Jewish philosophy of place, Israel is a complex matter.

Israel is an actual Jewish state, but at the same time it is also an idea and a symbol. The drama series allow viewers to experience Israel as both an idea and an actual place. In this way, they effectively serve this duality and complexity in American-Jewish philosophy of place regarding Israel. The identity-need with regard to Israel emerges clearly from the programs' Facebook groups, as well as from the survey. We can see that Jewish viewers are specifically interested in watching Israeli shows, and we can identify the various aspects of the Jewish experience evoked by the programs: yearning, memories, a sense of Jewish belonging, and connection to Israel. One of the most notable findings is the principle of "one Israeli series = multiple Israeli series." Based on the survey and the relevant social media, Jewish viewers generally watch more than one Israeli series (in contrast to non-Jewish viewers), and specifically seek out Israeli programs, regardless of genre or narrative style.

Jewish unity in a time of polarization

Israeli television drama series have the ability to create a shared and meaningful Jewish discourse. For instance, *Shtisel* is generating an "imagined solidarity" within an American-Jewish community that is currently experiencing extreme polarization and splitting into its various component factions, particularly with regard to the meaning of Jewish identity. *Shtisel* offers the community a sense

of Jewish solidarity and mutual responsibility: a Haredi family in Jerusalem is transfixing Jews from other communities – Jews with differing religious and sociocultural identities. Even if the solidarity created by *Shtisel* is essentially an imagined one – imagined in the sense that viewers have no real familiarity with Haredi Jews, and that there are major gaps between the different types of Jews who watch the show – it is still meaningful and unifying. The term **imagined solidarity** corresponds to the concept of **imagined communities** employed by the late Benedict Anderson, a political scientist and historian, to illuminate nationalism. Anderson argues that nationalism is an imagined phenomenon that is nevertheless highly meaningful as a social-psychological force. Similarly, the Jewish solidarity generated by *Shtisel*, and perhaps by other Israeli shows later on, is meaningful. In general, most survey respondents stated that they had viewed the programs based on word-of-mouth recommendations, which indicates the presence of an identical or similar element of Jewish discourse between different Jewish groups – an element that, in and of itself, points to a certain degree of unity, in contrast to the general polarization.

Part 1

Israeli TV drama series: historical background and the revolution of the 2000s

Israel's current status as a major player in the global television market is both gratifying and surprising. Beyond the actual achievement, this was an unexpected development given the history of Israeli television broadcasting. Israeli TV lagged 20 years behind the rest of the Western world.⁷ Although television became a worldwide mass medium in the period immediately following World War II, Israeli public television broadcasting began only in 1968.⁸ Since that time, Israel television has caught up with global television; Israel is now a global player of equal or even preeminent standing.

Major milestones in the history of Israeli television – its annals and attributes – are presented below. The history of Israeli television drama will also be discussed.

Original Israeli TV dramas, now enjoying international success with series such as *Fauda* and *Shtisel*, have come a long way since the Israel Broadcasting Authority's Drama Department was founded in 1977. Programs currently taking Israeli and foreign audiences by storm include new representations of Israeli life and Israeli society. We will look at the roots of the phenomenon, at the social and cultural processes that led to these new representations, and at the nature and meaning of the representations themselves.

History of Israeli television broadcasting, 1968-2020

As noted, Israeli television broadcasting began two decades later than in many Western countries and was accompanied by ideological strife. Opposition to it was led by then-Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion, with broad support from most members of the government and the Knesset.⁹ Discussions and arguments for and against the creation of a public channel revolved primarily around the

fear of negative foreign influences and problematic educational messages. Television was perceived as a major political and educational tool meant to shape Israeli identity and culture.^{10,11} Indeed, the Broadcasting Authority Law, 1965 states that [one of] the functions of the Israel Broadcasting Authority (IBA) is to reinforce Zionist identity [...]to reflect the life, the struggle, creative effort and achievements of the State.” (Broadcasting Authority Law, 5725-1965, Article 3). The IBA’s monopoly continued until the late 1980s. During those years of public broadcasting, Israeli television was felt to be a locus of Israeli cohesion, due both to the mamlakhti (statist) character of the programming, and the absence of competition.¹² The 1990s were years of change and revolution in the Israeli media market. During that decade, the IBA’s monopoly was broken, and Israeli television became a multi-channel market, with the entry of cable in 1990, satellite in 1999, and the jewel in the crown: a commercial channel in 1993. The latter’s launch sparked a revolution in Israeli broadcasting. The channel won the hearts of viewers and heralded a new era of commercial television and “ratings.”¹³

Alongside the success among viewers, the Israeli government undertook re-regulation of the Israeli television market.¹⁴ Technological developments emerged as well. In 2005, personal viewing technologies penetrated the Israeli market, which represented a sea change in how Israelis consume television programming. These technologies included VOD (video on demand) and DVR (digital video recording) services, the sale of TV shows on DVD, and the use of new delivery devices such as computers, tablets, and smartphones. Thus, in the early 2000s Israeli television started catching up to global television.¹⁵ Recently there have been additional major developments in the Israeli television industry. In 2017 the Israel Broadcasting Authority was shuttered; the Israeli Public Broadcasting Corporation, Kan 11 replaced the country’s historic first television channel.¹⁶ That same year, the Second Channel was split into two separate commercial channels – Channel 12, (Keshet 12) and Channel 13, (formerly known as Reshet 13); in January 2019, Channel 10 merged with Reshet, under Channel 13.¹⁷ The cellular companies Partner and Cellcom, which

penetrated the market with the advent of smart digital televisions, are also major players in the television industry. The companies offer OTT (over-the-top) Internet-based services; other services active in the field include STINGTV (by Yes) and Next TV by Hot. In 2016 Netflix, the world's largest streaming company, entered the Israeli market, offering VOD services to viewers equipped with smart TVs, computers, cell phones, or streaming media players.

These regulatory and infrastructural/technological developments opened a new chapter in Israeli television history. Yet, it is no less important– and perhaps even more so – that we also discern the powerful effect of sociocultural change. During those years, against a background of social and cultural flux, Israeli serial drama underwent a process of development and transformation.

The history of the Israeli television drama, 1968-2020

Before beginning our overview of the Israeli television drama from its beginnings to the present day, it is important to understand the unique genre that is the focus of this study. The TV drama series at the heart of this work, programs such as *Fauda*, *Shtisel*, and *Our Boys* belong to the category of "quality television." This terminology reflects a relatively new distinction in television studies between "high" and "low" art. In recent years a public and academic discourse of "quality artistic television" has developed in the West, referring primarily to serialized dramas, some of which are considered to be works of art – even masterpieces. One must, of course, distinguish between "quality" series and more "ordinary" ones, such as telenovelas and soap operas.¹⁸

The quality artistic television discourse emerged in the 1980s in the United States, with the appearance of *Hill Street Blues* (1981-1987). That series was followed by other quality shows such as *Thirty something*, *Moonlighting*, *L.A. Law*, *Twin Peaks*, and more. Although these programs were all the products of traditional network television, the pay cable channels contributed significantly to the genre's development. Because they were not subject to the dictates of the advertisers who sponsored commercial television or to the censorship

restraints of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), these channels began robust production of high-caliber drama series. The famous ad slogan for the American cable channel HBO – "It's not TV, it's HBO" – is emblematic of this trend toward the recognition of quality drama series as an independent artistic genre. Today, television is at the forefront of the Western creative enterprise, with quality series often surpassing cinematic works in artistic and narrative innovation. In Israel as well, quality TV dramatic offerings began to develop in the 1990s and have reached new heights in the 21st century.¹⁹

The history of Israeli television drama largely parallels the development of Israeli television as a whole. The Israeli television industry's change and growth processes broadly overlap with the changes and developments specific to original Israeli television drama. During the first period, that of Channel 1's monopoly, original drama series and productions were characterized by an aspiration to consensus.²⁰ They expressed the shared values of the Jewish Israeli collective and sought to reinforce the sense of Israeli *b'yachad* (togetherness).

During this period, there were almost no original productions; those that did appear suffered from meager budgets, political interference, and a dearth of professional experience.²¹ What's more, the channel was regarded as a broadcast outlet, rather than a producer of original programming – priority was given to licensing foreign programs rather than the creation of original dramas. Dramas that were actually produced by the station were generally adaptations of stories or filmed plays, which critics dubbed "anti-television."²² Subordinate to Kol Israel, the country's public radio service, television was for many years regarded as "filmed radio."²³ Acquiescence to public officials (the Israel Broadcasting Authority committees), who were primarily concerned with political censorship and with maintaining the nationalistic character of the programming, thwarted creative expression in the dramatic sphere, and of artistic considerations generally.²⁴

In 1977 the IBA's Drama Department was established, but due to political and economic clashes it was closed in the early 1980s. The Drama Department

yielded a relatively slim crop of original productions, but its closure heralded the end of what had long been considered an over-cautious Israeli TV drama production industry. We can deduce the nature of Israeli televised drama during this initial period by considering what it was not. *Ram Levy's Khirbet Khize* (1978), based on the novel by S. Yizhar (1948), is the exception that proves the rule. Loevy's *Khirbet Khize* is unusual for its artistic and subversive qualities. It is felt to be anti-statist, as it depicts an Israeli soldier reflecting on, and objecting to, the occupation of an imaginary Arab village, *Khirbet Khize*, and the deportation of its residents during the War of Independence. The program's airing sparked public uproar and angered both politicians and viewers. Harlap argues that the "*Khirbet Khize fracas*" led to the exclusion of issues and critical perspectives from dramatic texts within the Israeli television industry. An exclusion that continued until the early 2000s, the present "post-television" era to which the drama series on which this study focuses belong.²⁵

Paradoxically, it was the transition to the next period in the history of Israeli television broadcasting, the "1990s revolution"²⁶ or "the era of Channel 2's dominance, 1993-2005,"²⁷ that generated tremendous change in the original-drama sphere. The paradox is that it was precisely with the appearance of a commercial channel and the switch to a capitalist market that a change for the better in original Israeli drama got underway. The TV market's commercialization drove comprehensive regulatory processes that encouraged and provided a basis for original, quality television productions. Re-regulation institutionalized the multiplicity of broadcasting channels, and entailed local original productions and, in particular, dramatic productions. The number of Israeli series grew exponentially during the 1990s. Although the early programs were mostly telenovelas and "low brow" serials, the quality issue was quickly enshrined in legislation; the distinction between "high" and "low" and the imperative to invest in quality series became embedded in the Israeli market. Quality dramas produced during this period, which paved the way for future internationally acclaimed programming, included *Florentine*, *HaBurganim*, *Shabatot VeHagim*, and *Bat Yam - New York*.²⁸

In the 1990s, a period of revolutionary change, new creative and broadcasting norms were shaped.²⁹ The decade's crop of shows included a mix of high and low content; along with quality serials, innumerable game/light-entertainment shows, telenovelas, and reality shows aired. It is also worth noting that "statism" did not disappear, but rather changed in character and form. Noam Yuran contends that "Channel 2 established a 'new statism' and actually 'represented the state's ideology better than Channel 1 and in a manner better suited to the present, managing to serve the state and capital equally.'³⁰ This situation appears to be reflected in the TV drama *Basic Training (Tironut)*, which was produced in cooperation with the IDF. It encouraged young people to enlist in the Givati Brigade, and its creators were awarded a trophy from the Givati commander.³¹ The series exemplifies the new *mamlakhtiut*, (statism) showing clearly that Israeli television, in moving beyond "consensus" in the post-IBA-monopoly period, nevertheless frequently remained within the consensus. The turbulent and revolutionary 1990s laid the groundwork for the dramatic ascent and breakthrough of Israeli TV drama in the 2000s.³²

As noted above, Israel narrowed the gap with the rest of the world in television development early in the 21st century. At this point, the Israeli market may be characterized as technologically advanced, multi-channel, and far more professional in all its sectors than in the past. Harlap maintains that the period from 2005 to the present constitutes a new stage in the history of Israeli drama. This period, which he calls "post-television," **is characterized by high-quality, complex, and critical drama series.**³³ The change in content is clearly linked to the professionalization processes and the market's institutionalization as described above. Most important among these processes was the regulation applied to original drama production, and the new technologies that sparked a paradigm shift from "appointment television" to personal viewing. **But the complex content and the new representations are connected, above all, to wide-ranging societal change that occurred in Israel.** Two major developments and their impact are discussed below: the breakdown of consensus and the post-Zionist ideology.

The breakdown of consensus (and the waning republican discourse)

Cultural representations of prevailing moods and societal change are not absolute or complete, nor do they necessarily overlap precisely with the social dynamics themselves. Even the breakdown of consensus in Israeli society is not, in any case, an isolated phenomenon that arose at a single point in time, but rather a process that has been underway for many years.

The central, dominant ethos in Israeli society from the founding of the state until the 1990s was the republican ethos. This ethos was intended to ensure a high level of social cohesion in Israeli society; even if certain groups were excluded from the main ideological discourse of Labor Zionism, Mapai and the Labor Party, there was nevertheless a strong emphasis on statism, social cohesion, and consensus. Early signs of the breakdown and waning of this ethos could be discerned in the 1960s (the Rafi party; the Six-Day War, and the occupation of Judea and Samaria), and certainly in the 1970s – the decade of the mahapach (the political turnaround of 1977). However, and without entering into the intricacies of Israeli politics and ideology, we can say that within the overall process of change and breakdown, the 1980s and 1990s comprised a major turning point. During the 1990s the republican discourse reached its nadir. In its place rose fortified **liberal** and **anti-nationalist** discourses. The latter dealt a final blow to the republican discourse, which faded along with the Labor Party and the state institutions it had controlled since Israel achieved independence.³⁴

These liberalization processes are broad, complex, and sometimes contradictory – capitalistic economic neoliberalism hurts the weak, while liberalization and democratization strengthen civil rights and address the needs of individuals, minority groups, and the periphery.³⁵ At the same time, the rise of the anti-nationalist discourse in Israel can be seen in various ideological, institutional, and political developments, including the fortification of private religious and ethnic organizations, such as autonomous national-religious educational

institutions, National Religious Party yeshivot and ulpanot (girls' high schools), the Shas movement's El HaMa'ayan school system, and the rise of a discourse focused on Jewish nationalism in general.³⁶

Post-Zionism

Post-Zionism is a fraught term that is widely reviled in Israeli discourse. We should, therefore, clarify its meaning and usage. Post-Zionist theory, or the post-Zionist ideology, emerged in the 1990s as part of the aforementioned liberalization process. Although the theory has gained no real traction in Israeli society, mainly representing the views of a specific minority, it does account for a certain share of the public discourse, and certainly of the cultural, academic, and media discourse. Moreover, while post-Zionism itself has been rejected overall, it has nevertheless exerted considerable influence in terms of changing the approach or paradigm through which Israeli life is observed, providing a more critical and complex perspective.

In general, one should distinguish between the "hard" and "soft" versions of post-Zionism. Hard post-Zionism, which has faded from Israeli public life, completely delegitimizes Zionism, and portrays it as a colonialist project of dispossession and injustice that must be rectified. Soft post-Zionism, by contrast, does not negate Zionism. There are soft post-Zionists who condemn the Zionist movement, but their central claim is that the Zionist vision has been realized which has placed the movement at the end of its trajectory. There is a debate about whether those aligned with soft post-Zionism want to undo the state's Jewish character, as in hard post-Zionism, or whether they simply advocate a more equal polity without seeking to completely negate the state's Jewishness.

Again, the influence of post-Zionist ideology need not be all-pervasive or absolute. One example of "partial" post-Zionist influence manifesting primarily in a critical stance is the television series *Tkuma* (Rebirth). Although *Tkuma* is a documentary rather than a drama series and was aired in 1998 and not during

the 2000s, it represents the spirit of criticism and complexity that is emblematic of the "post-television" era. A comparison with the canonical series *Amud Ha'Esh* (*Pillar of Fire* – 1980) shows how critical views rooted in post-Zionist discourse penetrated both the *Tkuma* series and Israeli television discourse generally. While *Pillar of Fire* focused solely on the Jewish side, *Tkuma* presented a more complex story, in which two antagonists– one Jewish, the other Arab – twist and turn together in an endless struggle that hurts both, and that both play a part in escalating.³⁷ Interestingly, this description might also be applied to the current successful series *Fauda*, whose distinctiveness – and, perhaps, the secret of its success – lies in the attempt to "twist and turn" between the two sides and to present both sides of the equation.

Scholars Naveh and Yogev wrote that post-Zionism seeped out of academia into the cultural sphere, making its mark on Israeli collective memory and the means by which that memory is shaped.³⁸ Anita Shapira has also discussed and lamented the trend. According to Shapira, the media play a (too-active) role in shaping collective memory, while favoring the subversive post-Zionist positions emanating from the new historians and the critical sociologists over the analyses of the "old," i.e., the Zionist, historians (of whom she is one). Shapira also talks about the "migration of the consensus." Marginal ideas that were considered unsupportable in the 1970s and 1980s gained partial legitimacy in the 1980s and 1990s and are slowly changing our patterns of collective memory.³⁹

The serials of the 2000s introduce artistic and dramatic depictions and representations that reflect the societal and ideological developments that we have discussed here. The liberal discourse gave rise to serial dramas that deal both with individuals and with multiculturalism and minority/peripheral groups that are penetrating the cultural center. The programs reflect real-life processes such as burgeoning individualism and shifting center-periphery relations, but they also influence and reinforce these social trends. Another important player in the liberal discourse and the privatization of the Israeli market is the private television and film foundations. The foundations have a sociopolitical agenda

that is liberal, multicultural, etc. They have injected private funds into the market and encouraged the production of programs that deal with different sectors of Israeli society, and with the Israeli periphery.⁴⁰

Some series demonstrate that TV shows are an appropriate and hospitable forum for social criticism, rather than just for entertainment or the transmission of tribal solidarity messages. The criticism arising from the new liberal outlook may also be directed against aspects of that outlook. For instance, the series *30 Shekels Per Hour*, *Blue Natalie*, *Shvita (Strike)* offer socioeconomic criticism of neoliberalism, hypercapitalism, and post-Fordism.⁴¹ The programs *HaTasritai (The Writer)*, *Muna*, *Nevsu*, *Shtisel*, and *Kipat Barzel (Commandments)* reflect a multicultural agenda, while *Imaleh*, *Yom Ha'Em (Mother's Day)*, *Bilti Hafikh*, *Ima veAbaz (Mom and Dads)* give expression to a shift away from conservatism in the family and gender spheres. By contrast, the ethno-national discourse is evident in shows such as *Srugim*, *Me'orav Yerushalmi*, and *Savri Maranan*. Naturally, one also finds an artistic mix of the liberal and ethno-national discourses. *Srugim*, for example, deals with the National Religious sector and probes aspects of the ethno-national discourse, but it also broke new ground in its depiction of liberalizing trends within that sector.

The changing "Israeli self-awareness" brought new, more critical and complex representations to the small screen.⁴² Post-Zionism contributed to a critical outlook that permeated certain drama series, and in particular to an engagement with Israeli society's self-image in the shadow of questions of trauma and victimhood. The trauma that was repressed in Zionist discourse, which put the "New Jew" and the "strong, tough sabra" center stage, has become a major topic in contemporary serial dramas and also promoted large-scale engagement with victims, victimhood, and victim playing in contemporary Israeli life.

We will turn our attention to the complex picture of Israeli life conveyed by the new series. Our discussion will focus on three programs: *Fauda*, *Shtisel*, and *Our Boys*. These series have garnered international acclaim and are central to the present study.

The "new complexity:" Israeli serial dramas during the 2000s

The new complexity (1): paradigm change and new representations

The phrase "new complexity" – as applied to present-day Israeli television shows – refers to shifts in the representation of Israeli life on the small screen. As a result of the aspiration to artistry, these series offer fuller, more "fleshed out" characters, not stereotypes or caricatures. Series such as *Fauda*, *Shtisel*, and *Our Boys* present Arab and Haredi characters of depth and complexity.⁴³ Formerly, such representations were virtually nonexistent, and series that included Arab or Haredi characters confined themselves to narrow stereotypes.⁴⁴ The new programs give in-depth treatment to conflicts of identity and to social and national conflicts; they do not shy away from complex messages or from portraying difficult, intractable situations. They present critical viewpoints on issues such as trauma, and with regard to questions of victimizer, victim, and victimhood in the Israeli context. They do not refrain from dismantling myths, attitudes, and paradigms that formerly dominated the public and national ethos. They show cultural and human closeness between population groups that are supposed to be distant from, and even hostile toward, each other. In so doing they cast doubt upon and subvert cultural and societal conventions. And finally, the diversity of these programs, and their tendency to portray multiple and varied subgroups within Israeli society, such as the Haredim of Jerusalem's Geula neighborhood (*Shtisel*), Israeli undercover soldiers in the Territories (*Fauda*), Sephardic youth on the margins of the Lithuanian Haredi yeshiva world (*Our Boys*), and more, create a rich mosaic representing a complex society caught in a difficult reality.

See, for example, the opening scene of the first season of *Fauda*, in which an injured Arab enters a mosque and asks for help. While he is receiving the requested assistance, he suddenly reveals a rifle and, with threats, abducts the man who has come to his aid. It soon emerges that the "wounded" man is none other than the commander of a *mista'arvim* (undercover) IDF unit, and the

abductee is a wanted Palestinian terrorist. Underneath the superbly rendered action scene, the fast cuts and suspenseful twists, lies a novel and perhaps subversive idea: the Arab terrorist can also be someone who lends a hand to a mysterious injured stranger at a mosque. What is revolutionary about the scene is its use of the "mutual responsibility" ideal – a quintessentially Jewish-Israeli concept that is transferred here to the Palestinian side.

This kind of representation, which calls attention to the human being beneath the terrorist, was almost never seen during the earlier eras of Israeli drama discussed above. *Fauda* has changed the rules of the game of Arab and Palestinian representation. It gives Arabic equal time with Hebrew and emphasizes the complexity of life in the shadow of the bloody Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Despite being an action drama, the series explores its characters in depth, rather than clinging to stereotypes of soldiers, terrorists, and the like. *Fauda* does not try to paint a flattering portrait of a single side, the Israeli side; rather, it reveals the scope of injustices that can arise in situations of combat and conflict.

One of the most engaging and compelling characters is Shirin, a Palestinian woman doctor who emigrated to France but returned to Judea-Samaria to care for her aging mother. Shirin is repelled by violence and wants to keep away from it, but again and again she is drawn – by those who ostensibly love her – into the battlegrounds of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. She falls in love with Doron, the program's Israeli protagonist, but experiences a series of disappointments and betrayals that peak in Season 3, when Doron accuses her of collaborating with El Makdessi, a deranged and vengeful terrorist who had killed his (Doron's) father. Shirin loses her will to live and ends her own life. The Shirin character effectively illustrates the conflict's cruelty, but also shows that there are people on both sides who are not necessarily interested in war. Shirin and other characters in the series, Palestinians and Israeli Jews, are fleshed out in a way that subverts absolute binaries of heroism and villainy, compassion and cruelty, right and wrong. This is something truly new in the world of Israeli television drama.

The new complexity also denotes critical perspectives and a questioning of the accepted paradigms of Israeli society. This can be seen, for instance, in how trauma is explored as an integral factor in Israeli life, including the relationship between the original trauma of the Holocaust and those of the present-day: life in the shadow of war, the occupation, the breakdown of the b'yachad (togetherness ethos), and more. Trauma is also connected with the victimhood discourse, and in the new "equation" attention is sometimes given to Israeli victimhood, and sometimes to Palestinian victimhood. Harlap argues, as noted, that post-Zionist discourse facilitated the entry of trauma and victimhood discourse into Israeli society. Zionism glorified the image of the New Jew, the tough and macho Sabra, and did not allow recognition of the weakness of the Israeli subject. The change in approach allowed elements of trauma and victimhood to seep into public discourse, and then into Israeli culture as a whole, and the TV drama series in particular.⁴⁵

Engagement with victimhood figures prominently in *Fauda*. The idea of the victim is central, and the series depicts both sides of the conflict, Israelis and the Palestinians, are victims. Trauma is a key element in every season of the series and serves to drive the plot. In the first season, for instance, the series draws a parallel between two tragic and troubled figures whose actions are driven by trauma, as is the plot. Boaz is a soldier in the IDF's mista'arvim unit whose girlfriend is killed in a terror attack, and Amal is a young bride whose husband, Bashir, is killed by Boaz on the night of their wedding. Boaz shoots Bashir in order to protect a member of his team during an operation that spirals out of control. Tormented and troubled in the aftermath, he finds it difficult to control his actions. Amal decides to carry out a revenge suicide attack and arrives at the pub where Boaz's girlfriend works wearing an explosive belt; the girlfriend, as noted, is killed in the attack. Boaz is later abducted, tortured, and finally murdered by Bashir's brother. The brother, Abu Ahmad, is an arch-terrorist who has murdered hundreds of Israeli civilians; the operation that went wrong (and in which Bashir was killed) was actually an attempt to capture him at his brother's wedding. Boaz and Amal are both trapped in a cycle of violence out

of their control. Trauma and loss take over their lives, illustrating the intensity of the conflict and its terrible costs. This is also true of the other characters: Abu Ahmad loses his family and is ultimately murdered by his deputy. Doron, determined to capture Abu Ahmad, disobeys orders; his family falls apart, and terrorism makes its way into his home when Abu Ahmad plants a bomb and blows up Boaz, his brother-in-law.

Trauma is a central feature of many other contemporary Israeli series. *When Heroes Fly (Bishvila Giborim Afim)* is another well-known program that was sold and succeeded internationally. In this series as well, most of the male characters suffer disruptive PTSD. For instance, the character Elisha, leader of a drug cult in the Columbian jungle, is actually shell-shocked from the 1982 Lebanon War. Series protagonist Aviv and his teammates also suffer from repressed combat stress reaction sparked by a difficult episode in that war.

Our Boys takes the exploration of victimhood and trauma one step further. The series deals with the Israeli-Palestinian cycle of victimhood, but actually focuses on the Palestinian Arab side, and on the revenge murder of a teenager, Mohammed Abu Khdeir. The main criticism raised by numerous Israelis was that it focused on the Palestinian victim, with almost no attention to the Jewish victims, the three boys who had been kidnapped and murdered by terrorists, an event that led to the abduction and murder depicted in the series. In fact, the series director, Joseph Cedar, in an interview by Israeli journalists Amit Segel and Yaron Deckel, said that he had chosen to deal with the Palestinian side, and that in his eyes, at this point in time, they are the main victim in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In response to accusations of having aired Israel's "dirty laundry" abroad (the 10-part miniseries was a coproduction of the Israeli Keshet Media Company and HBO, which aired it in 2019), Cedar said that, as an artist, he is committed solely to artistic truth. Cedar's stance as expressed in the interview echoes the broader societal change noted above – the fading of the republican discourse, along with national consensus and the sense of Israeli b'yachad. Those outlooks and feelings still exist, of course, but at much less strength and intensity. *Our Boys* also gives expression to the major source

of tension in Israeli today – between the liberal-individualistic discourse and the ethno-national discourse. On the one hand, the series takes a critical view of events connected with the ethno-national discourse, which is depicted as extremist and racist, and which (as presented through the prism of the series) can potentially, under difficult circumstances, lead to violence and even murder. On the other hand, *Our Boys* rejects the old mantra that art and culture should be used as vehicles to present a positive and attractive image of Israel to the world. In contrast to the republican ethos of the exalted collective, Cedar prefers an individualistic-liberal outlook. He asserts his freedom as an artist and favors his private perspective over the national ethos or the sacrosanct duty of being an "ambassador" of Israel. The "ambassador" paradigm, in which Israelis abroad are always representatives of Israel and therefore obligated to portray Israel in positive and admirable terms – functioning as "soft power" generators – has been cast aside. The public debate over the series demonstrated that both the liberal ethos and the ethno-national ethos, figure prominently in Israeli discourse. Some accepted the series as legitimate to varying degrees, and others rejected it as illegitimate to varying degrees.

The industry establishment and the reviewers took a generally favorable view of *Our Boys*; the miniseries won Israel's Best Drama Series Award and garnered a total of 14 wins at the 2019 Israeli Television Academy awards ceremony. Although these awards are conferred by a specific segment of the Israeli populace, one with a clear ideological orientation, *Our Boys'* success attests to some degree – perhaps a significant degree – to an erosion of the "ambassador" paradigm, and to the centrality of criticism and complexity in today's discourse. In any case, compared with the *Khirbet Khize* controversy discussed above, the present public discourse evinces change in terms of the ability to accept criticism and complex messages regarding Israel.

Because Israel's image is a major aspect of this study, it is important to emphasize that, even if Cedar's views do not dovetail with the ambassador paradigm or ideas about Israeli soft power, the criticism that comes across through the series does not deny the State of Israel's legitimacy or embody a post-Zionist

worldview. Cedar's partner in the creation of the series, Hagai Levi, found it important to emphasize that the Shabak (Israel Security Agency) investigator's determination to find out the truth and bring the Jewish perpetrators to justice, sparks admiration for Israel as a country where law and order prevail, and fair trials are conducted. Levi's decision to show the "positive" side of the chaotic reality depicted in the series also reflects his concern for Israel's image. As with other, less critical shows such as *Fauda*, *BeTipul*, and *When Heroes Fly*, *Our Boys* highlights thorny dilemmas with which Israeli society has been, and still is, engaged.

Our Boys clearly conveys views that are "harder" to digest for some Israeli Jews, especially for those accustomed to "ambassadorship." The show is also oppositional, critical, and underscores the traumatic dimension of Israeli life and Israeli society. Nevertheless, despite what Cedar has said, one should note that the series is not one-dimensional even if, as Cedar attests, it focuses on the Palestinian victim. It does not disregard Israel's share of victimhood, or the difficulties on both sides of the equation.⁴⁶

The way the figure of Avichai, the young murderer, is handled, conveys that he himself is a kind of victim; the series does not portray him as a monster, but rather tries to find out what motivates a young person who is not a cold-blooded psychopath perform the radical acts of kidnapping and murder. *Our Boys* highlights the complexity of Israeli life, including problematic and difficult issues, but without denying the basis or modes of Israeli existence. This is not delegitimization but rather constructive criticism. Later we will look at the reception of *Our Boys* by foreign viewers, with further discussion of the series and its impacts.

The new complexity (2): center-periphery relations

The diverse and complex representation of various peripheral social groups has been a major feature of Israeli television in the 2000s. This is true of the three series at the heart of this study: *Shtisel* (Haredim), *Fauda* (Mizrahim and

Palestinian Arabs), and *Our Boys* (Mizrahi Haredi youth and East Jerusalem Arabs). It is also true of many other programs that have aired at the same time as these three series.⁴⁷ The turning of attention to the periphery, and the periphery's entry into Israeli culture in a way that blurs the center-periphery dichotomy is connected with Israel's eroding consensus, the decline of the hegemonic Ashkenazi elite, and the rise of a liberal discourse that encourages support for the periphery. Notable here is the entry into the picture of the film foundations that have encouraged the production of dramatic works dealing with Israeli minority groups.⁴⁸ At the same time, the ethnonational discourse is also present in other series of the era such as *Srugim*, *Savri Maranan*, *Shababnikim*, *Kipat Barzel (Commandments)*, and others. However, it is interesting to consider programs that integrate elements of the various types of ethos – for example, the combination of strong ethnonationalism and liberal views in *Srugim* and *Kipat Barzel (Commandments)*.

In any case, while the drama series of the first stage reflected change processes and a blurring of boundaries between periphery and center in Israeli society, by the second stage the programs were already evincing the further advancement of change, with the boundaries between center and periphery becoming more and more fluid. In the first stage one saw new and more complex representations of the Israeli periphery. In the second stage attention was paid to the periphery's growing presence in the center, i.e., the periphery's transformation into a part of the Israeli center. In this context one may compare the series *Arab Labor*, introduced in 2007, with the 2015 series *The Writer (HaTasritai)*. Both programs were created by Sayed Kashua, who wrote about his personal experiences as an Arab Israeli. While *Arab Labor* takes a mildly humorous tone, *The Writer* is an open wound. The humor is replaced by penetrating reflections on the place of Arab Israelis in society and public life. The critical statement weakens messages of integration; essentially, while in *Arab Labor* Kashua focused on the attempt to penetrate Israeli society – a penetration of the periphery into the center – in *The Writer* he depicts the psychological difficulty experienced by someone who is part of Israeli society but torn between multiple identities –

Arab, Israeli and even to a certain degree, Jewish. In any event, the place of *The Writer's* protagonist in Israeli society is understandable or at least natural, and more understandable than the place of Amjad the main character of *Arab Labor* (this shift, and the critical tone, are also increasingly evident in the successive seasons of *Arab Labor*). The casting of the protagonist roles in both series illustrates the difference. Amjad is played by Norman Issa, an actor who looks authentically Arab and whose Arabness is unmistakable. Kateb, the hero of *The Writer*, is played by Yousef Sweid, an actor who looks more Jewish-Israeli than Arab. Kashua is aware of this and "uses" Sweid's Jewish Israeli appearance in episodes where various characters have trouble identifying him as Arab. The casting illustrates the trend toward integration while also highlighting deeper and more complicated issues of identity and belonging.

Another series, *Muna*, stresses the protagonist's feminine identity no less than her Arab identity. This story of life in Israeli society is not just the story of an Arab who moves from a Galilee village to Tel Aviv but also – and perhaps primarily – the story of a woman undergoing that process. The choice to emphasize the gender dimension actually drives home the fact that a television series about a young Arab woman in Tel Aviv is a natural occurrence in today's Israel.

Furthermore, contemporary drama series not only present complex Arab protagonists and representations of Arab culture and Arabness, but also show the central place of Arabness and Arab culture in Israeli culture and identity. There is a closeness between Arab culture and Mizrahi (Jewish) culture, which itself has long since become an integral and central part of Israeli culture. Internal processes within Israeli society have brought Mizrahi culture from the country's cultural periphery to the center, and now the television dramas are also revealing the cultural parallels between Israelis and Arabs. This is not merely a shift in content, but rather a paradigm shift in how relations between the two peoples and cultures are perceived. The foreign perspective of the non-Israeli viewer only brings into sharper relief the process, the similar elements, and the existing cultural closeness. Foreign viewers of *Fauda* say that they have trouble distinguishing between the Arabic and the Hebrew spoken in the

series – and in any case the (Israeli) protagonists sometimes choose to speak Arabic among themselves. Likewise, they sit together and smoke hookahs while listening to Arabic music. Although the *mista'arvim* disguise themselves as Arabs, and although there is a "professional" acting dimension at play, the show also highlights the connection of the soldiers, most of whom are of Mizrahi background, to the "Arab" roots of their identity. This is particularly evident in the early seasons with regard to the protagonist Doron, whose father is an "Arab Jew" with an identity strongly linked to Arabness, who is in close daily contact with his Bedouin neighbors.

The main issue for us, in any case, is the cultural connection revealed by the series, and its presentation as a natural thing. Thus, it emerges that Mizrahiness is already part of Israeliness and, furthermore, that there is a relationship and an affinity between Israeliness and Arabness.

This cultural affinity shows bitter enemies to also be distant relations. The closeness revealed on the screen is groundbreaking in terms of Israeli dramatic representations and, again, constitutes a paradigm shift in the representation of Jewish-Arab relations in Israel. The Israelis and the Palestinians in *Fauda* seem closer than ever; they share cultural leanings in terms of music, food, festive behavior, hospitality, language, and manners. However, it is precisely the cultural closeness emerging from episode to episode that underscores the fearsome complexity of the reality in which they live.

One major example of this is the Arabic (or Mizrahi) music that accompanies the series. There seems to be an intentional blurring of Arab and Israeli, with acclaimed Israeli musical artists such as Dudu Tassa and Idan Amedi singing the songs written and composed in Arabic. Mizrahi music is a central and integral part of Israeli culture, and this additional step toward the larger Arabic culture highlights the place of Arabic culture itself in contemporary Israeliness. The theme song of Season 3, *Lahalo*, (On His Own) is performed by Dudu Tassa in Arabic. The song was written by another prominent Israeli artist, Sha'anán Streett, lead singer of HaDag Nahash (Snake Fish). The theme song of Season

2, Menassim (Trying) is performed by Idan Amedi in Arabic and Hebrew. The first season's theme song, Holekh Holekh (Walking Walking), is performed in Hebrew in a Mizrahi style. The switch from Mizrahi-style Hebrew to a bilingual mix and then to the third-season song in Arabic also illustrates Also among the artists themselves.⁴⁹

Also, in the series *Our Boys* we can see a central narrative that links the Arab boy to the young Mizrahi murderers. This narrative, which also explains the name of the series, suggests a partial resemblance between the Arab murder victim, who belongs to a minority group in Israeli society, and the Sephardi Haredi (National Haredi) boys who also constitute a discriminated-against minority within the Ashkenazi Haredi society of learners. In essence, they are a minority within a minority: the Haredim are a minority in Israeli society, and the Sephardi Haredim are a minority within the mainly-Ashkenazi Haredi community. The series also points up the fact that Arabic culture is an integral part of the boys' lives, even if, in contrast to the protagonists of *Fauda*, they are unaware of this and even deny it. The series shows the three murderers listening together to a musical ensemble, seen performing at a henna ceremony (Episode 4) with Arab instruments such as the oud. And even on the night of the murder they notice the similarity between the Arabic music played in Jerusalem's Shu'afat neighborhood and Sephardic piyyut (Jewish liturgical poem) melodies (Episode 8), though they disclaim the cultural resemblance, maintaining that the Arabs appropriated their music from the Jews. The musical identification and the reactions to it – accusations of cultural theft – reflect a critical stance toward the ethnonational discourse on the part of the show's creators, a position rooted in liberal discourse. The episode implies that the boys are prisoners of a nationalistic religious education that will not let them follow their hearts toward a music and an art that bring people together. Instead, they mouth opinions aligned with the nationalist racist ethos that distances them from their Arab neighbors; the shared culture, rather than serving as a bridge, becomes a point of contention and discord. Simon, the Shabak agent and the series protagonist, also speaks fluent Arabic, and in his Mizrahi identity is close to the "Sephardi" boys and, in fact, to Arab culture.

Another, more extreme, variation of this approach can be seen in the series *Valley of Tears (Sha'at Ne'ila)*. In the final episode, in a dialogue between the Syrian interrogator and the Israeli (Mizrahi) prisoner, the interrogator notes the cultural connection between them. He tries to depict the closeness between them as meaningful and blames the Zionists of European origin for destroying the solidarity between Arabs and Jews from Arab lands.

The drama series are depicting not just a different, new, and more complex Arabness, but also a new and more complex Israeliness. Israeliness changes its form and gives prominence to new and complex elements within it, making Mizrahiness, and to some degree Arabness, a significant component of contemporary Israeliness. JPPI's 2020 Pluralism Index noted that Israeli Arabs identify more as Israelis than as Palestinians.⁵⁰ The change is attributed primarily to the recent election cycles and to political developments. On the cultural end, one can see that in the present Israeli space there is significantly more room available for Arab culture and identity markers, which could potentially constitute an additional explanation for Arab Israelis' growing sense of belonging. The culture reflects contradictory trends – the loathing, racism, and social disparities connected with Arabness and/or Mizrahiness in Israel and, at the same time, the introduction of Arab and Mizrahi culture into the Israeli mainstream.

The Haredim constitute another peripheral sector penetrating the center. In addition to *Shtisel* (2013- 2021), which has won global acclaim, other series dealing with Haredi life have appeared in Israel: *A Touch Away (Merhak Negiya* – 2007), *Kathmandu* (2012), *Shababnikim* (2016-), *Commandments* (2017), *Autonomiyot* (2018), *Unchained (Matir Agunot* – 2020).⁵¹ These series as a group, and *Shtisel* first and foremost, have changed the way Haredim are represented in Israeli television. While representations of Haredim were once stereotypical and shallow, the new programs show "rounded" and complex characters. *Shtisel* is an outstanding example of this trend reversal, and of the more complex and human representation of this Israeli minority group. Like the Arabs, the Haredim are considered a disfavored and disesteemed underclass.

In JPPI's 2020 Pluralism Index, the Haredim were rated lowest in terms of their contribution to the state; during the coronavirus pandemic tensions worsened and the general public displayed greater anger toward the Haredi sector.⁵² There can be no doubt, overall, that the series has strengthened Israeli multiculturalism. Apart from promoting greater knowledge of, and familiarity with, the Haredim, *Shtisel* has subverted the hidden assumption that the Haredim are trapped in ghettos and need the secular public to save them from themselves. The series' viewers have (also) found charm and beauty in the conservative and closed world of the Haredim.⁵³

It must be emphasized again, that the drama series generally reflect social developments and trends more than they promote them. The Haredi (and other) programs have an impact and generate change at various levels, but for the most part they mirror deep-seated societal forces and processes. The Haredi shows reflect the sector's approach to the Israeli center. Eliran Malka, creator of *Shababnikim*, has discussed this: "The basic assumption of the series is that there are Haredim who are not just Haredim, but ones whose reference point is Israeliness. The protagonists of the series, the *shababniks*, young Haredi men, want to be part of Israeliness, to be part of the Israeli story and not to watch from the sidelines any longer.⁵⁴ Besides Malka, other artists, formerly from the cultural periphery, are describing the move inward, toward the center. Religious, Mizrahi, Haredi, and other creators are talking about how, today, their work is at the heart of the Israeli cultural experience (Ibid). In JPPI's Pluralism Index, 54% of Haredim say they feel like "true Israelis" to a high degree. By contrast, only 8% of Haredim do not feel like "true Israelis." It should be recalled, however, that most Israelis view the Haredim as the group least involved in Israeli society, and that the COVID-19 crisis "reset" the equation; it is too early to assess the scope and nature of the change wrought by the pandemic.

The growing interest in Haredi representations is connected to liberal discourse – the multiculturalism which as noted above, the film foundations promote. Also, somewhat paradoxically, that interest is an outcome of the rise of the ethnonational discourse. Thus, as noted by Malka, *Shababnikim* tells a story of

entry into the national arena and a shared ethnic identity. Moreover, according to Harlap, representations of Haredim have become "legitimate" in the eyes of secular audiences, due to developments driven by post-Zionist discourse that have helped erode the Zionist "New Jew" image that had been the antithesis of the exilic, religious Jew.⁵⁵ In any case, the "Haredi" series augment the general complexity and add color and new layers to the "Israeli society" mosaic that they delineate.

To conclude: the 2000s have seen Israeli television close the gap with world television, with original Israeli dramas generating international interest. In my overview, I looked at technological and regulatory developments in the Israeli television market, with a special focus on social and cultural change. The cultural shifts that have taken place are intertwined with the social shifts, as are the diversification of representations that we have noted, the greater complexity on the screen, the critical elements, and the ideological and creative innovation, which all arise from the tenor of Israeli society and the types of ethos that dominate it. The transition from a republication ethos to a liberal and ethnonational ethos, elements of post-Zionist critical thinking, the discourse of trauma and victimhood, the decline of the "ambassador" paradigm and the rise of peripheral groups as well of individualistic attitudes, have resulted in new representations and content on Israeli television. Today's serial dramas paint a complex picture and reflect Israeli society's prevailing trends as well as its diversity.

Part 2

Israeli serial dramas: reception and influence in North America and the rest of the world

"Over the last few years, Israel has indeed become a world leader in the exportation of television programs and series, with successes such as *Fauda*, *Shtisel*, *Euphoria*, and others."⁵⁶

In 2006, the first Israeli drama series, *BeTipul (In Treatment)*, was sold to the American HBO network. The American remake was a success, and paved the way for other Israeli series, including *Prisoners of War (Hatufim)*, which was remade into the globally acclaimed *Homeland*.⁵⁷ We have now reached the second or peak stage of Israeli serial dramas garnering success in the international market. At this point, Israeli creators are not confining themselves to the sale of remake rights in the US and elsewhere; rather, Israeli series themselves are being sold and broadcast in their original form.

In 2016, Netflix acquired *Fauda*, constituting a new level of success for an Israeli drama series abroad. Today, Israeli programs are sought-after in the original, and are aired abroad with no changes and not as remakes (e.g., *Fauda*, *Shtisel*, *Tehran*). There is also continued large-scale remake activity involving other Israeli series. Programs such as *Taagad*, *Euphoria*, *His Honor (Kvodo)*, *Beauty and the Baker (L'hiyot Ita)*, *On the Spectrum (Al HaSpektrum)*, and others, are being sold as conceptual content and remade in the US and elsewhere. In the current era, even series such as *Our Boys* and *Hostages (Bnei Aruba)*, which were at first sold and remade, are now being aired and enjoying great popularity in their original Israeli form. *Prisoners of War*, for example, made first place on a New York Times list of the best foreign TV shows of the decade.⁵⁸ Two streaming services were recently launched that feature mainly Israeli and Jewish content and that target foreign audiences (available solely abroad). One of the services, Izzy, is an Israeli service that offers all-Israeli content, including shows about Israeli society and Jewish and Israeli history. The other, Chaiflicks, offers films

about Israel and Judaism. These streaming services are yet more commercial proof of the success of Israeli serials, and of the growing worldwide interest in Israeli/Jewish content.

The following sections will examine the reception of Israeli television dramas abroad, try to determine the secret of their success, and appraise how they affect Jewish and non-Jewish viewers around the world, especially in North America. We will conclude our discussion with a consideration of the phenomenon in terms of Israeli soft power.

The reception of the Israeli drama series by foreign viewers

The new complexity (3):

"For foreign viewers, Israeli TV serves as a window into a country that is largely mysterious. The highest-profile example is *Fauda*. This story of an undercover Israel army unit engaged in a brutal game of cat and mouse with terrorists on the West Bank may sound cliched, but rather than taking sides or caricaturing the Israelis and Palestinians, *Fauda* paints a nuanced portrait of men and women locked in a cycle of perpetual conflict."⁵⁹

"For me (besides loving to hear the Hebrew) there is often a more nuanced view of Israel and Israeli culture than the stereotypical Disneyland."⁶⁰

What is the secret of the Israeli serial dramas' success with foreign viewers? In order to answer this question, let us take a step backward and consider a different question: What are the images and representations of Israel that feature in these shows? The table below displays a list of the Israeli series mentioned by the survey participants.⁶¹ For each series, the main image represented by the Israeli protagonist is noted.

Series Title	Image
<i>Shtisel</i>	Haredim
<i>When Heroes Fly</i>	Soldiers
<i>Our Boys</i>	Haredim
<i>Fauda</i>	Mizrahim – Mizrahi ,Undercover soldiers Israeliness, Palestinian Arab identity
<i>HaMidrasha</i>	Mossad agents
<i>Srugim</i>	National religious, singles in Jerusalem
<i>Shababnikim</i>	Mizrahi Haredim
<i>Hostages</i>	Regular citizens, security
<i>Prisoners of War</i>	Soldiers
<i>The Good Cop</i>	Police
<i>False Flag</i>	Mossad agents
<i>Beauty and the Baker</i>	Citizens, general, entertainment

A quick look shows that the prevailing image remains what it always was – the Israeli as a security person, agent, or soldier. However, two major changes have occurred. First, the growing number of Israeli shows available abroad has also introduced foreign viewers to Israeli protagonists who are not "security people."⁶² Additionally, an in-depth view reveals the degree to which the "security" protagonist image has changed, as have representations of the reality and the sociocultural context in which that protagonist operates. The change is embodied in the new complexity that informs the depictions of the characters and of Israeli life. Without undertaking a deep historical discussion, we may say that non-Israeli viewers used to be shown "security" protagonists of little depth who personified absolute heroism or who were daring, uninhibited fighters.⁶³ The earliest American feature films to deal with Israel gave center stage to the heroism and courage of the Israeli pioneer, molded in the image of his American counterpart. This was true of such American films of the 1950s and

1960s as *Sword in the Desert* (1949), *Cast a Giant Shadow* (1966), *The Juggler* (1953), and, of course, *Exodus* (1960), starring Paul Newman.⁶⁴ Later, one finds additional heroic representations – soldiers and, in particular, Mossad agents acting on Israel’s behalf and in its name. In the 1970s the heroic figure of Yoni Netanyahu featured in two American television dramas: *Victory at Entebbe*, and *Raid on Entebbe*.⁶⁵

This trend continued into the 1980s and 1990s; even today, in the 2000s, and despite the representational changes discussed in this work, American films and TV shows still depict Israelis in narrowly stereotypical terms, as security people, fighters, and secret agents. See, for example, *NCIS* (2003), *Homeland* (2011-2020), *The Blacklist* (2013), and the feature film *Munich* (2005). In the 2018 satirical program *Who Is America?*, the British Jewish comedian Sacha Baron Cohen disguised himself as a former Israeli soldier named Erran Morad. The Morad character was portrayed comically, as a parody of the macho Israeli, for the American and global audiences. **In contrast** to these figures, some of which are exemplary and some of which are caricatures, the new Israeli shows offer complex Israeli protagonists acting in a complicated and multidimensional reality. Thus, even if the Israeli protagonists onscreen are combat soldiers or security people (*Fauda*, *Our Boys*, *When Heroes Fly*, *Prisoners of War*, *Hostages*, *False Flag* (Kfulim), *Mossad 101*), their depictions are a long way from the superficial and one-dimensional characters of the past.

The success of the Israeli television dramas can in large measure be attributed to these complex representations. Israeli life itself is fascinating and full of conflict. A relatively young Jewish state in the heart of the Middle East, coping with an array of conflicts and societal rifts – national, political, religious, ethnic, and economic. **When such a reality is conveyed on the screen in a professional, sensitive, and authentic manner, the product is capable of touching the hearts of viewers, whoever they may be. Today’s television audience wants complex and authentic drama series.** The international popularity of the Israeli shows is connected with changes in the field as discussed in Part 1: professionalization, the emergence of quality drama series within Israel, and the penetration of

political and social developments into the general culture, which draws a more complex perspective on Israeli life in all its forms and with all its problems. In this sense, the international audience is no different from the Israeli audience: it, too, is attracted to the new complexity through which reality is mediated. The old images of absolute heroism and the black-and-white depictions of reality are no longer viable. Viewers would likely have trouble identifying with simplistic or absolutist messages; movies like *Exodus*, blockbusters in their time, have lost their appeal. As the two quotes above show, the Israeli TV series are a window on an unfamiliar world, and they attract viewers by offering a **complex, nuanced, and un-clichéd** look at the reality beyond the headlines.

Critics and journalists have addressed this point. David Halbfinger of the New York Times wrote of *Fauda* that the series seeks to depict both sides of the equation and to show a painful reality as it had never been shown before – imperfection on the Israeli side, and human elements of the Palestinian enemy.⁶⁶ Scott Roxsborough, an editor at The Hollywood Reporter, said that the Israeli shows are marked by a level of accuracy and authenticity that does not exist in Hollywood films. According to him, while American productions such as *Homeland* have been accused of Islamophobia, Israel's *Fauda* actually displays an outstanding level of precision and credibility.⁶⁷ Yasmeen Serhan, a journalist of Palestinian heritage who writes for The Atlantic, has also discussed its authenticity. Serhan mentioned the psychological difficulty she experienced when deciding to view the series. As its creators, Avi Issacharoff and Lior Raz, have noted, *Fauda* is an Israeli series that mediates reality from an Israeli, rather than a Palestinian, perspective. Nevertheless, Serhan writes, the show manages also to bring the Palestinian perspective to the screen. Although she sometimes felt uncomfortable with some of the portrayals, she found that *Fauda* had succeeded to a greater degree than any other television or film treatment of the topic in conveying the complex reality of the conflict.⁶⁸

Similarly, Ruth Margalit wrote in The New Yorker that *Shtisel* exposes and dismantles prevailing erroneous and superficial assumptions about the Haredim (Israeli Haredim in particular, though the same might be said of all

Haredim).⁶⁹ Margalit and other writers such as Bienart and Secunda have noted the importance of the accurate, in-depth, detailed representation of the world that *Shtisel* brings to life.⁷⁰

Facebook groups dedicated to the Israeli shows also feature discussions of the nuanced and complex representations of Israeli life. Based on these discussions, it is clear that there is a connection between the programs' quality and their complexity. Viewers are astonished at the artistic power embodied in the telling of a complex human story that transcends stereotypes and clichés.⁷¹

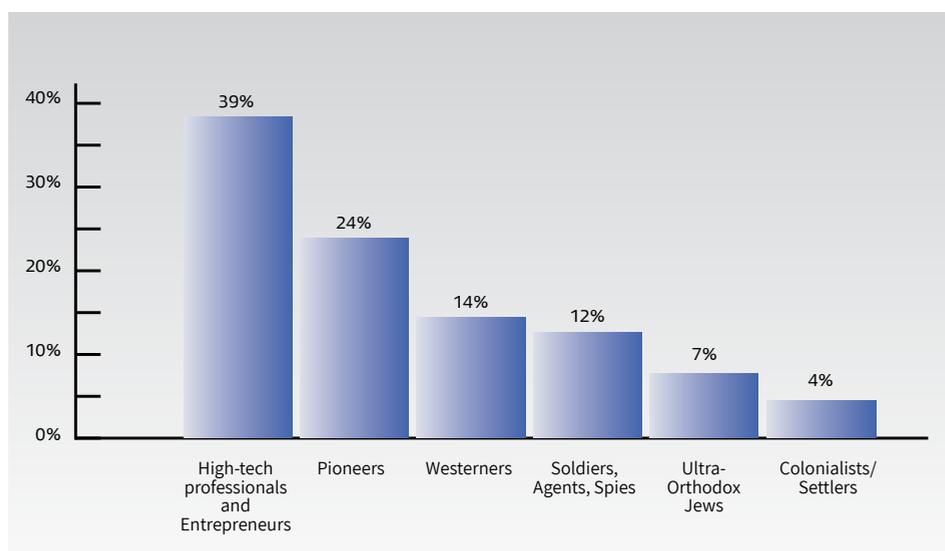
It seems that the depictions of Israeli life and, in particular, the complex and nuanced way in which it is represented onscreen, are major factors in the success of these shows abroad.

In our viewer survey, we tried to determine the extent to which the changes in dramatic representation had had an impact on the ground. We presented six common images of Israelis (and an "other" option for those who did not identify with any of the images), and asked respondents to choose the one with whom they most identified. The following graph (Figure 1) shows that most Jewish respondents [39%] chose the image of the Israeli as entrepreneur and high-tech innovator. It is hard to definitively state what that choice means. It may arise from deep familiarity with an Israel known for its entrepreneurial and high-tech leadership; it may be linked to a sense of Jewish pride. As noted above, most of the Jewish respondents attested to a strong attachment to Israel, and the drama series reinforce that attachment and Jewish pride. It may also be that exposure to the programs, and the learning element bound up with that exposure (covered in the next section – Knowledge and Learning About Israel) influenced the viewers. Indeed, as one can see from the graph, most of the Jewish viewers who completed the survey follow several different shows and are thus exposed simultaneously to a variety of representations and images from Israeli life, e.g.: Haredim, National Religious, Westerners, Mizrahim, Ashkenazim, Ethiopians. These myriad Israeli "types" would tend to promote a less superficial and more realistic outlook on Israel. It should be noted that the

entrepreneur choice indicates an overall-positive attitude toward Israel. The essence of entrepreneurship is to take a problem and try to effect a positive outcome from it, not necessarily to start a startup in one field or another. In any case, and as Figure 1 shows, the image (and stereotype) of the Israeli as a security officer has indeed eroded.

From another angle, the choice of the entrepreneur image can be linked to the words of Alon Aranya, a former Israeli who is now a highly regarded US-based television producer. According to Aranya, the success of the Israeli shows reflects Israel's entrepreneurial character. He believes the programs represent Israeli entrepreneurship, and the Israeli desire to transcend borders and succeed on an international scale.

Figure 1: The image of Israel perceived by Jewish series viewers



Israeli Television Dramas' Impact on Foreign Viewers Learning about Israel

"Ultimately, I think it's divided between people who see *Fauda* as an action series or thriller, and those who view it as a documentary about the conflict."⁷²

Israeli TV shows affect viewer levels of knowledge about Israel. Those who

watch them see Israeli life in all its diversity. Viewers of *Fauda* are thrust into the heart of the bloody conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians. Viewers of *Shtisel* are introduced to the Haredi neighborhood of Geula and learn about how ultra-Orthodox in Israel live. Other series present other aspects of Israeli life, and little by little the full mosaic of Israeli society emerges. Many viewers take part in discussions about the shows on social media. Some of these discussions center around plot details or analyze scenes, while others expand into broader and more general questions about Israeli life, society, and politics.

One American participant in the *Fauda* Facebook group wrote that, thanks to the series, he had encountered Israelis and Palestinians for the first time in his life and learned about the conflict between them. Another participant said that she had learned a great deal about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, while yet another wrote that, through watching the show, she experiences life in Israel and in the Middle East. Other participants have mentioned their desire to visit Israel and learn more about it. Still others have shared that they had visited Israel and wrote about how the trips added to their understanding of the country in general, and of the series in particular. Some in this latter group visited the shows' filming locations during their stays in Israel.⁷³ The following was written by a non-Jewish viewer of *Srugim*:

"As an American, gentile (goy?), non-Hebrew speaking black person, I appreciate *Srugim* for giving me a window into a culture I would not otherwise have experienced... I appreciate *Srugim* because I got to see multi-faceted *dati leumi* going about daily life in Jerusalem. A plane ticket from MSP [Minneapolis] to TLV is 1900\$, so my subtitled DVD is the only place I would have been able to experience this world. On one level, I watched the acting and stories as entertainment, but I also watched as education on Israeli life, religion and pop culture. I mean, I know it's a TV show not a documentary, but still..."⁷⁴

Although *Srugim* is a relatively old series, aired in Israel from 2008-2012 and distributed in the United States beginning in 2014, it is still available today (on Amazon Prime and Hulu), and continues to enjoy great popularity.⁷⁵ In the

Facebook groups mentioned in this study, participants frequently recommend it as one of the best Israeli series available. The show revolves around a group of young adults from the Dati-Leumi (National Religious) sector who live in Jerusalem's Katamon neighborhood, known as "The Swamp," due to its high concentration of religious singles. For these young people, The Swamp provides a kind of alternative community, in the absence of the family frameworks they have yet to establish.⁷⁶ *Srugim* generated interest among US Jewish viewers but was also surprisingly popular with non-Jewish viewers who had little prior knowledge of Israel or of National-Religious Zionism.⁷⁷

The Facebook groups embody **crowd-wisdom** knowledge-acquisition processes. In the *Fauda* group, a heated debate arose over the difficulty and means of distinguishing between Hebrew and Arabic. The participants touched upon both the psychological dimension (the feelings elicited by each language), and the scientific dimension (the origins of the languages, etymological differences between them, and the like). *Shtisel* group participants raised various questions about the ultra-Orthodox way of life. A non-Jewish participant asked about the meaning of the many announcements that line the streets in Haredi neighborhoods and received an explanation about the pashkevilim that appear along the roads of Bnei Brak, Geula, and Mea Shearim.⁷⁸

The following examples are anecdotal, but also highly illustrative of the "wisdom of the crowd" element that characterizes these groups. Participants in the "*Shtisel* – Let's Talk About It" group wondered whether Israelis are ardent tea drinkers, as nearly every scene in the series shows family members sitting and drinking tea. The ensuing discussion comprised no fewer than 329 responses (plus 75 emojis).⁷⁹ The responses were varied in nature. One participant related that, while living in Israel, she had drunk a lot of tea; someone else said that the characters in *Srugim* actually drink a great deal of coffee. Yet another said that her grandfather, a Jew from Eastern Europe, would often drink hot tea, and that she assumes that the series is referencing the Eastern European Jewish roots of Israel's Haredi community. Another viewer wrote that, apart from Americans who drink iced tea, nearly all cultures like their tea hot. One responder offered

a short history lesson on the Israeli tea company Wissotzky, which was founded in the 19th century by the Russian-Jewish philanthropist Zeev Wissotzky and eventually moved to Israel; the contributor also expounded on Sephardic and Turkish influences discernible among Jerusalem families that have been in the city for generations (despite being of Ashkenazi background).

Some wrote responses that expressed their identification or conveyed humor, e.g. "I also drink hot tea all day," or that addressed the show's creative and aesthetic dimensions – its ambience, etc. The range of responses illustrates the group discussion's variegated quality – the mix of "high" and "low" that

facebook

I'm a Norwegian Christian, and watching *Shtisel* makes me long for my childhood in Geula.

13.7.19, "Shtisel" –
Let's Talk About It

characterizes the television medium itself, with its mingling of social, psychological, and poetic elements. The responses also highlight the multiplicity and diversity of the group's participants: Jews and non-Jews, series fans from all over the world. In any event, the discussions deal primarily with the series and with Israel, Jews, and Judaism.

In another discussion, conducted during the Covid pandemic, mention was made of the outbreak in Israel's Haredi neighborhoods. One viewer posted a news video from Channel 12,

showing Haredim in Jerusalem's Mea Shearim neighborhood resisting police with violence and derogatory language. In the responses and the ensuing discussion, one participant noted that the video had been filmed in Mea Shearim, while the *Shtisel* family lives in Geula. A detailed (and impressive) explanation was given about the types of ultra-Orthodox communities in Israel and the differences between the two aforementioned Haredi neighborhoods. Overall, the *Shtisel* group discussions reveal great heterogeneity in terms of knowledge about Israel; they provide a framework for collaboration between

different viewers who share knowledge and "study" time together. The group is a platform whose basis is interest in the series, but it is also a source of general knowledge about Israel.

Regarding *Fauda*, it is notable that the series has many viewers from Arab countries. Moreover, the Netflix Top Ten lists for Ramadan 2020 show *Fauda* in first place in Lebanon, third place in the UAE, and sixth place in Jordan. In light of Israel's normalization agreements (Abraham Accords) with Bahrain and the UAE, it should be noted that the fan groups include viewers from these countries. In this sense, knowledge, learning, and (cultural) connection with Israel (also) arise from the television screen.

Jewish learning and learning about Jews

"I have loved *Shtisel* and learning so much about the Jewish religion. I was fascinated to see that Jewish people read and write from right to left and it looked as though reading a book or document, they start from the back...⁸⁰

"Anyone here had a discussion about the grandmother saying to giti [sic] about how to get rid of the ego, by asking for nails in a Pharmacy [sic]?"

"This is part of the "Mussar" movement that was started in Eastern Europe by Yisroel Salanter in the 1800s. Several schools of thought emerged from this one being that students had to remain humble and engage in activities that promoted humility.⁸¹"

Beyond the opportunity to learn about Israel, the TV dramas offer Jewish learning and sociocultural knowledge about Jews/Judaism. Jewish learning can be defined as the reading and interpretation of sources and texts from the Jewish bookshelf. The television shows provide a variation of that kind of learning, in that they raise halachic and moral dilemmas with a Jewish context. Examples of this would be *Srugim's* engagement with issues of halachic infertility, ritual immersion for single women, and homosexuality, or the above-quoted Facebook discussion on the Mussar movement, sparked by a scene

in which Malka *Shtisel* uses a story of the movement's leader, Rabbi Yisrael Salanter, to teach Giti humility. *Shtisel's* characters are generally torn between the stringent halachic rulings and conservative lifestyle of their community, and their hearts' desires. Akiva aspires to be an artist, while his father demands that he find a *shidduch* (matrimonial match); his brother dreams of being a singer but has to content himself with a mediocre career as a Torah scholar in a kollel; and Malka, *Shtisel's* terminally ill friend at the senior residence, wants Malka to help her end her life with the aid of sleeping pills. These dilemmas, in which

facebook

Someone in the group forwarded me Shtisel classes, taught on Zoom by Rabbi Nissan Antine, an orthodox Rabbi from Potomac, Maryland.

14.5.21 "Shtisel" –
Let's Talk About It

universalist-human issues interact with halachic and Jewish-particularist issues, are main features of the series.

The Israeli drama series are also unquestionably a framework for sociocultural learning about Jews and Judaism, with viewers being introduced to Jewish tradition and to various religious affiliations. Through watching *Shtisel*, one can learn about ultra-Orthodox society and the communal way of life peculiar to it: the tension between the conservative lifestyle and modernity, the penetration of technology into Haredi community life, the patriarchal family, and much more. In addition to

Shtisel, which is focused on the Haredim of Geula, other Israeli shows deal with different religious groups: *Srugim* – the National Religious; *Shababnikim* and *Our Boys* – the Haredim; Kathmandu – Hasidim, Chabad. Beyond the shows' function as primer "texts," their Facebook groups serve as learning platforms. A major feature of the *Shtisel* groups is the explanations of Jewish customs that arise in the course of discussion. Questions are asked both by Jewish viewers lacking the relevant knowledge, and by non-Jewish viewers: Why do

the women wear wigs? What is the Haredi dress code and the reasons behind it? Why do married couples sleep in separate beds? Why is the kitchen counter covered with plastic? And more.⁸²

The questions and the detailed answers point to a Jewish learning endeavor, a channel for the transmission of knowledge about Jewish customs and aspects of Jewish tradition. It should be noted that the term learning corresponds well to *Shtisel*, whose creators were very careful about authenticity and faithfulness to the Haredi way of life. Apart from the knowledge that the series creators, Ori Elon and Yehonatan Indursky (the latter was raised and educated in Jerusalem's Haredi community), brought to their project, Haredi mashgichim (supervisors) were part of the show's production team. The mashgichim guided the actors, taught and "supervised," and checked each and every detail of the script and the acting. Thus, the series gets the finer points of Haredi culture right, making it a reliable source for knowledge acquisition about that culture.

The series *Unorthodox*, which also has its own Facebook fan group, and which is often referred to by members of the *Shtisel* groups, offers a similar kind of Jewish learning. *Unorthodox* is not an Israeli show; it has been dubbed "Netflix's first Yiddish production." The main character is played by Shira Haas, who also appears in *Shtisel*; other Israeli actors are in the *Unorthodox* cast as well. The authenticity of the series' portrayal of the Satmar Hasidic community has been extensively discussed (Satmar is particularly extreme compared with other Haredi groups). Some have argued that the show does not faithfully depict life in this community, that it misrepresents things. The uninformed viewer cannot understand the nuances or know when the series is favoring drama over authenticity. In the case of Satmar, a relatively small Hasidic sect, even Israeli and Jewish viewers who do not belong to that group might be misled.

This criticism illustrates yet another issue – the difficulty of the television-drama-mediated Jewish learning experience. It would appear, however, based on the extensive discussion of this topic on Facebook and in the general media, that it is easy to point out "mistakes," to talk about "truth," and to learn

about Jewish customs in the information and social media age. The Facebook groups provide a democratic space in both the positive and the negative sense; thus, even when there is offensive content or "fake news," there is still space for responses and counterresponses. Group administrators manage the discussions and supervise the content and the discourse. Ultimately, the drama series are indeed a platform for discussion; Jewish "texts" are placed on display and thus, in accordance with the Jewish exegetical tradition, wide-ranging discussions are opened up that encompass knowledge, debate, interpretation, and more. The very fact that these discussions are based on television texts and are being conducted within social media platforms, where many of the participants are not even Jewish, illustrates the modern and of-the-moment nature of this form of Jewish study.

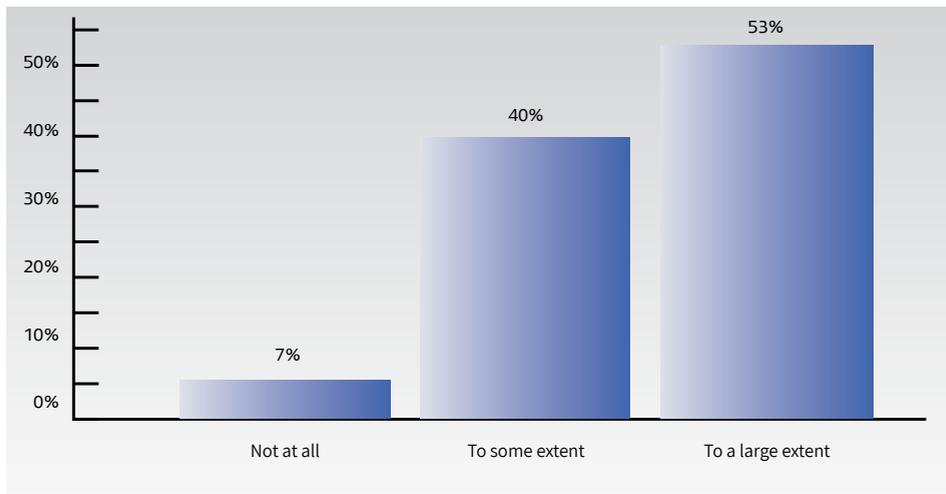
Attachment to Israel

"American Jews are the AIPAC of the series, they're unquestionably wild about it, they're the hardcore fans. When we go abroad, they'll always come to listen and speak."⁸³

Viewing Israeli drama series reinforces American Jews' connection to Israel. The "connection to Israel" parameter refers to an emotional attachment to the Jewish state. Israel is regarded as an element of Jewish identity, and so for **American Jews** it is a major and significant parameter.⁸⁴ For non-Jewish viewers, the parameter is unclear and less self-evident.⁸⁵ The discussion below on **the intensity of connection to Israel** will, therefore, relate solely to Jewish viewers.

The above quote about Jewish viewers' attendance at *Fauda*-related events abroad, "to listen and speak," as Shamir puts it, and Shamir's likening of these viewers to AIPAC, illustrate that, for certain viewers, the series is not just an entertainment experience, but also a means of connection with Israel. Indeed, Figure 2 shows that viewing Israeli television shows reinforces Jewish viewers' attachment to Israel.

Figure 2: The effect of watching Israeli TV series on the sense of connection to Israel, among Jewish viewers



This graph indicates that **the viewing of Israeli drama series has a significant positive emotional effect**. Most Jewish respondents (53%) said that viewing Israeli TV shows makes them feel much more connected to Israel. Forty percent said that the shows strengthen their connection to some extent, while only 7% said that watching the shows had had no effect at all on their attachment to Israel. **What this means is that, for the vast majority of the American Jewish viewers who took part in the survey, viewing the programs has a large degree, or some degree, of positive impact on their sense of connection to Israel.**

As noted in the methodology section, our viewer sample is not a representative sample of American Jewry. Most of the Jewish survey respondents already had a strong attachment to Israel and a strong Jewish identity. Only a minority of respondents represented Jewish subgroups not connected to Israel or Judaism. Thus, most of our findings point with certainty to Jewish subgroups that are connected to Israel and to Judaism, while there is less certainty about other (not connected) groups. However, a comparison of the groups points toward an initial general orientation of the impact on the various Jewish groups. It should be acknowledged that these are initial impressions, and that additional research focused on Jewish groups with a weaker attachment to Israel and a

thinner Jewish identity will be necessary in order to validate our conclusions regarding the survey's minority groups.

Figure 3 also addresses the impact the Israeli television shows have on viewer connection to Israel, but here the comparison is between American Jewish viewers for whom "caring about Israel" is important for their "being Jewish" (pink), and American Jewish viewers for whom **caring about Israel is not an important element** of their being Jewish (green). One can see that, while for the group that is strongly connected to Israel (per level of caring), the TV shows' connection-strengthening impact is significant, for the weakly-attached group the impact is less significant. Most of that group – 58% – did state that viewing the series strengthens their connection to Israel to a large extent or to some extent. However, 42%, a substantial minority, attested to no impact in terms of strengthening their attachment to Israel. Additionally, the gaps between the two groups once again illustrate that, among Jews for whom caring about Israel is important, viewing the shows reinforces the connection to Israel to a greater and more statistically significant degree. **Although the Israeli TV shows do strengthen most American Jewish viewers' connection to Israel, they have a stronger effect on Jews whose sense of connection to Israel was strong to begin with.**

Another comparison, in Figure 4, relates to the survey respondents' knowledge about, and familiarity with, Israel. The question was that of the degree to which Israeli television shows strengthen the connection to Israel among two groups of Jews – Jews whose level of familiarity with Israel is high, and Jews whose level of familiarity with Israel is low. One can see that for the former group, a significant positive effect of reinforcing the connection to Israel is maintained. **However, the low-familiarity group also displays a statistically significant positive effect on the sense of connection to Israel.** One should note that the "to some extent" response regarding strengthened attachment to Israel was actually higher among those who were not familiar with Israel than among those who were.

Furthermore, when the two graphs (3 and 4) are compared, we find that the TV shows' effect on the strength of connection to Israel is more substantial among those who are unfamiliar with Israel, and less substantial among those who do not attest to caring about Israel.

Israeli drama series have an impact on the different subgroups within a clear ranking hierarchy. The ranking is topped by those with a strong connection to Israel – "familiarity and caring," followed (closely) by those who are unfamiliar with Israel. At the bottom of the ranking, among Jews who express no caring for Israel, one finds an effect that is positive but more modest compared with that of the first two groups.

Figure 3: The effect of watching Israeli TV series on the sense of connection to Israel (according to level of concern), among Jewish viewers only

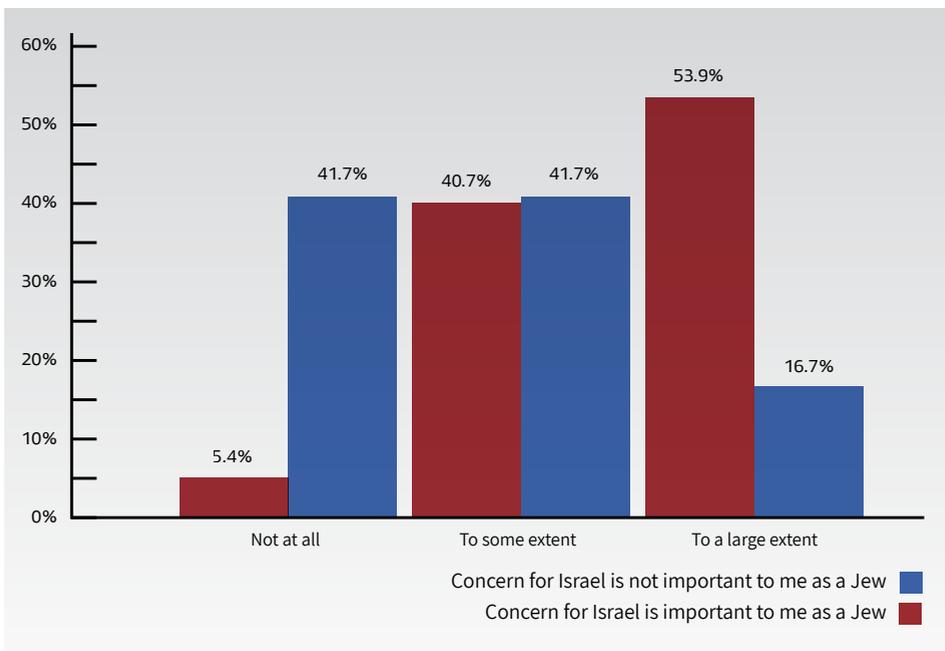
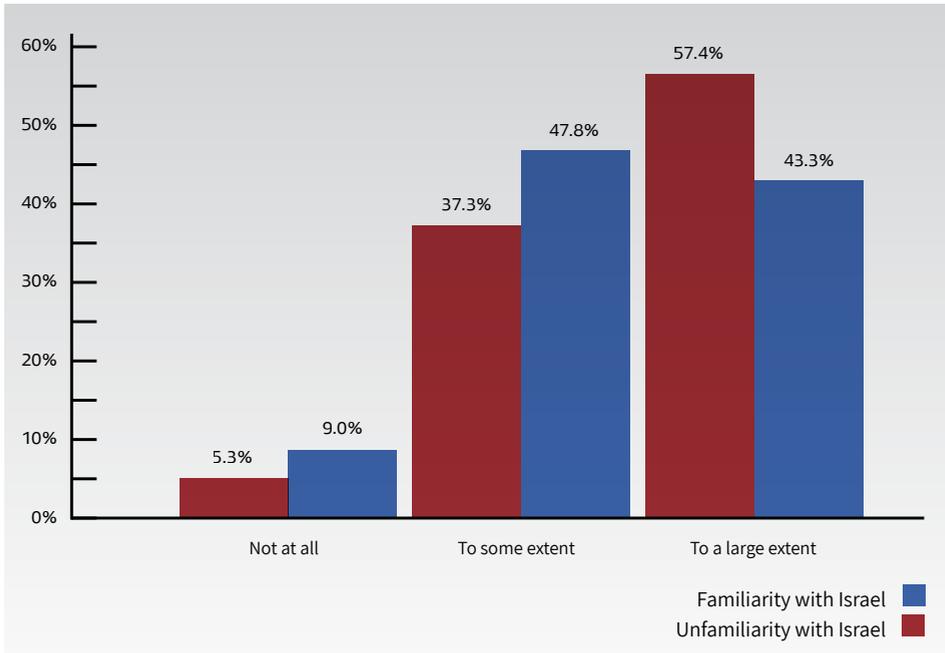


Figure 4: The effect of watching Israeli TV series on the sense of connection to Israel (according to level of familiarity), among Jewish viewers only



Perspective on Israel among Jewish viewers

Besides examining the impact of the Israeli shows on the sense of connection to Israel, the survey also looked at how they affect perspective on Israel. "Connection" refers to the degree of connection and attachment to Israel, in particular the sense of closeness, attachment, and caring. Connection may also encompass a rationalistic element, but this would at most be one component in combination with others, with the emotional element predominating. "Perspective," as opposed to "connection," does not here encompass an emotional attitude toward Israel. "Perspective" refers to a rationalistic approach to Israel. This could be a political or ideological outlook; generally, it expresses agreement or disagreement with the state's (the Israeli government's) guiding principles, policies, and conduct).

Regarding Jewish viewers, most (58%) did not change their perspective on Israel as a result of watching the shows. This finding indicates that most of the impact of the series is emotional (connection to Israel) rather than rationalistic, political, or ideological (perspective on Israel). However, there is also a sizeable group (41%) of Jewish viewers whose perspective did change, in a positive direction. In any event, the TV shows do not negatively affect perspective on Israel. Also, the impact is primarily emotional (connection to Israel), not rationalistic (stance).

In Figures 5 and 6 show how the Israeli TV shows affect the Jewish subgroups discussed above (Figure 5: those who express caring and those who do not express caring; Figure 6: those with high and low levels of familiarity with Israel). Figure 5 indicates that, while most members of both Jewish subgroups said that watching the shows had not changed their perspective on Israel, those whose perspective had changed in a positive direction were mainly those who attested to caring about Israel (41%), versus just 27% of those who did not attest to caring about Israel. Of particular interest, however, is that in Figure 6, among those lacking familiarity with Israel, the positive effect of watching the shows on perspective was higher than among those familiar with Israel (47% versus 38%). This indicates that it is precisely those who are unfamiliar with Israel who display the strongest (positive) effect.

A comparison of the figures emphasizes that:

- One's opinion is harder to change than a sense of connection.
- Overall, connection to Israel is the main impact parameter linked to viewership of the Israeli serials.
- Viewership does not generally have a negative effect on opinions.
- It is clear that, among those lacking familiarity with Israel, viewership has a greater impact on opinions than among those familiar with Israel.
- Among those who express no concern for Israel, watching the shows generally does not change views regarding Israel at all.

In any case, the graphs affirm that of the two groups – those familiar with Israel and those unfamiliar with Israel – the group that is more readily influenced is that of Jews whose familiarity with Israel is low. It is easier to positively influence this group’s outlook on, and sense of connection to, Israel, than it is to influence those who do not attest to caring for Israel and who, it would seem, are critical of Israel – which explains the difficulty of changing their perspective on Israel.

Figure 5: The effect of watching Israeli TV series: perspective on Israel (according to level of concern), among Jewish viewers only

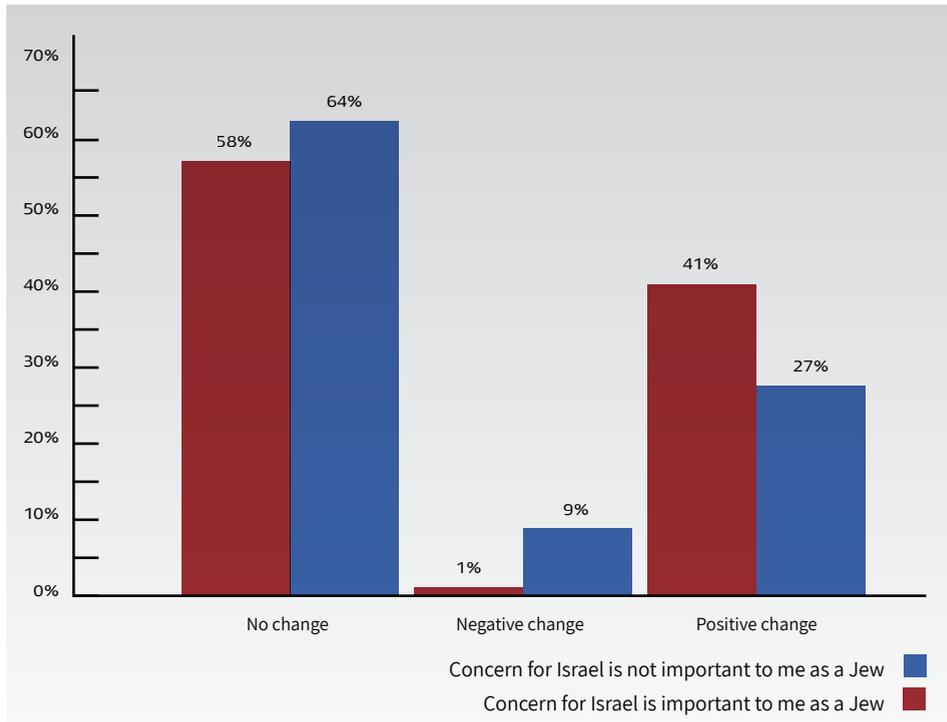
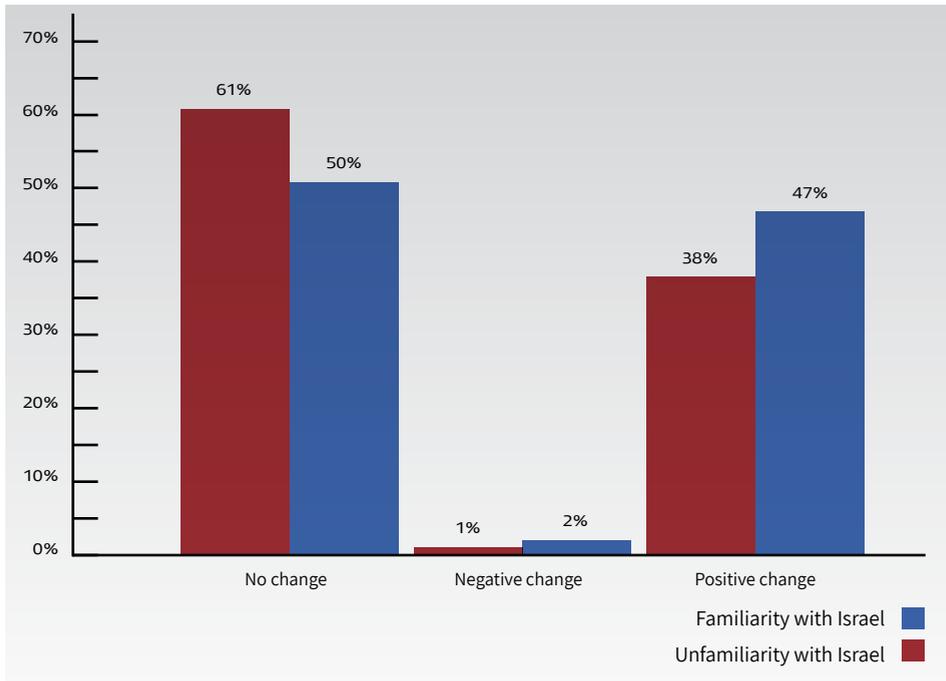


Figure 6: The effect of watching Israeli TV series on perspective regarding Israel (according to level of familiarity), among Jewish viewers only



The findings pertaining to the positive effects of viewing the shows, especially in terms of connection to Israel and, to a lesser degree, perspective on Israel, are of great importance, particularly with regard to the thesis of American Jewry’s distancing/disconnection from Israel. The shows, and the viewing of them, along with other means, could serve as a positive counterforce to the distancing and disconnection trends. We can see, however, that watching the shows generally strengthens the "strong" – those who are already attached to Israel; for them the television dramas are yet another vehicle for fortifying the connection. On the other hand, studies show that this Jewish subgroup has been growing smaller in recent years – the shrinking middle – and that it is important to reinforce and preserve it.⁸⁶ The "shrinking Jewish middle" manifests in a migration of the "strong" center of "connected" Jews to the extremes of Orthodoxy and assimilation. The TV shows may be added to the "basket" of policy measures oriented toward preserving the identity of the middle.

It emerges, moreover, that the TV shows also have a major impact on Jews with no substantial connection to Israel, Jews for whom caring about Israel is not an important part of their Jewish identity and, in particular, Jews who are unfamiliar with Israel. Although the findings for these Jewish subgroups are preliminary, for the most part this initial orientation underscores the necessity of additional research. The impact on these groups of Jews who are distancing and disconnecting from Israel and from Judaism is important, and the extent and type of impact that the television shows have on them is worth investigating in greater depth.

Perspective on Israel among non-Jewish viewers

"Perspective on Israel" is a parameter of interest regarding non-Jews as well. As noted, the survey included a very small sample of non-Jewish viewers, but one can discern, preliminarily, that non-Jewish viewers are divided between positive effect on perspective (49%) and no effect on perspective (50%). For these viewers as well, watching the shows does not push perspective in a negative direction. This finding is similar to the finding for Jews unfamiliar with Israel (Figure 6). Both groups were found to be readily influenced in a positive direction with regard to their outlook on Israel, which supports the conclusion that groups lacking knowledge (Jews, who per the index, have no knowledge or who may be assumed to have little knowledge about Israel) are the groups most easily swayed in a positive way by their viewing experience.

The American (former Israeli) producer Alon Aranya has also discussed the positive impact and the way in which series such as *Fauda* and *Tehran* "serve" Israel. These shows counterbalance extreme and fundamentalist outlooks, placing the human story at the center and even suggesting cultural and human connections "between them and us."

As emphasized above, the shows present a complex reality and provide a nuanced view of Israeli society and culture. Israel is depicted as a complicated place, socially and nationally – Arabs, Palestinians, Datiim and Haredim – but

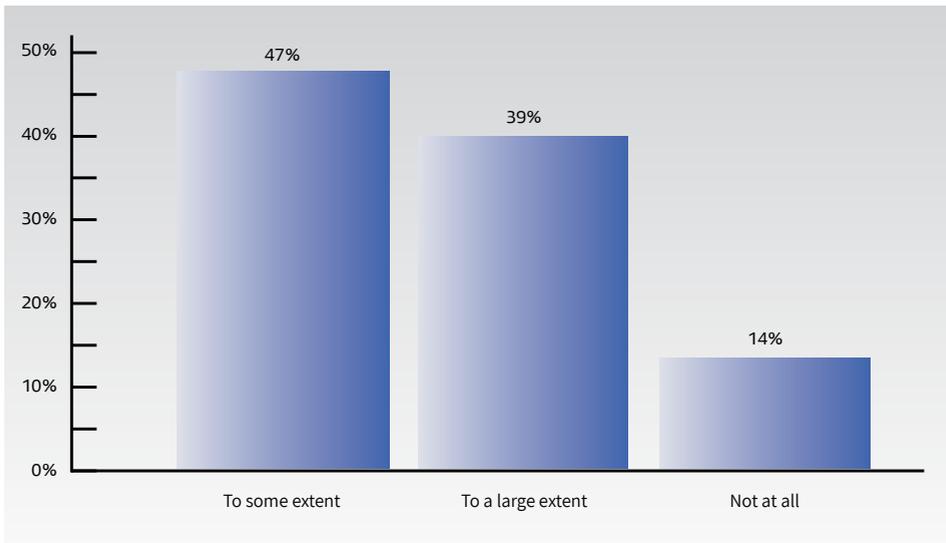
also as a human place, which elicits identification. Although *Fauda* sparked political uproar when BDS supporters called for the series to be dropped from Netflix, it ultimately enjoyed huge success even in Arab and Muslim countries; many of *Fauda's* fans were angered by the BDS position and pointed out the complex manner in which it addresses the conflict.⁸⁷ The series creators have stressed in various interviews that it was also important to them to show the human side of the Palestinian enemy.⁸⁸ *Fauda's* Palestinian characters are, for the most part, fleshed out and human. On the other hand, the show's Israeli point of view is obvious – the main plot focuses on the Israeli protagonist, Doron Kavillio, and his mista'arvim unit comrades. The creators, Raz and Issacharoff, themselves served in that unit and have even represented Israel at an AIPAC conference. Both have stressed, in multiple venues, that they are telling an Israeli story, from an Israeli perspective, yet they are doing so in a complex, innovative way compared with what was done in older Israeli shows.

Jewish identity

"I think that watching Israeli television shows connects people to Israel. For those who have visited there, they see sites that they'd seen while there. For those who have not been to Israel, it excites them to want to visit to see it firsthand. **I think it sparks the Jew in everyone and brings them closer to their roots.**"⁸⁹

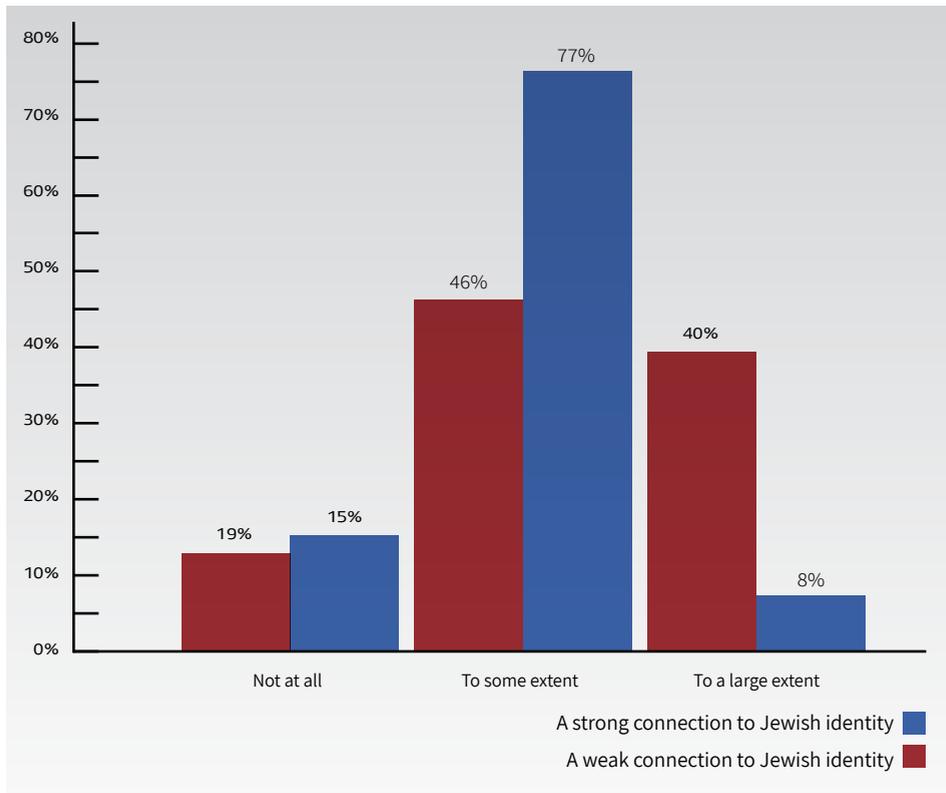
As Figure 7 shows, the Israeli drama series have the effect of strengthening the Jewish identity of their viewers.

Figure 7: The effect of watching Israeli TV series on Jewish identity



In Figure 8, one can see how the shows affect the Jewish identity of Jewish viewers whose Jewish identity was strong/weak to begin with. The graph shows that the programs have a fortifying effect on a majority of Jewish viewers. Most of the difference between viewers of strong and weak Jewish identity lies solely in the degree of impact ("to a large extent" versus "to some extent").

Figure 8: The effect of watching Israeli TV series on Jewish identity (according to the degree of general connection to Jewish identity)



Watching the shows answers a need for continuous contact with Israel as a means of preserving Jewish identity. For many American Jews who want contact with Israel in their everyday lives, the programs constitute an inexpensive, convenient, and entertaining "opportunity" for such contact. Compared with other means of reifying the relationship with Israel, such as friendships with Israelis, trips to Israel, and temporary residence there, the advantages of television are readily understood. The drama series provide a foundation of pleasure and interest with the potential for artistic catharsis; given the Netflix revolution and the availability of the programs on American channels, they are now a particularly inexpensive and convenient option. As participants in various Facebook discussions have attested, the programs allow them to "pop over" to Israel on a weekly or nightly basis.

The need for contact with Israel for Jewish-identity purposes may characterize different reference groups within American Jewry. This would of course be true of Jews who are connected to their Jewish identity and to Israel; for

facebook

More than 40 years ago I spent 4 weeks in Israel two of which were spent working on a Kibbutz (Kfar Blum) where I picked up some conversational Hebrew. Thanks to watching Shtisel I find that some of my conversational Hebrew has returned to me and furthermore I have discovered Youtube videos to help refresh my skills.

3.7.21, "Shtisel"-
Let's Talk About It

them the shows are often a nostalgia trip enabling them to revisit to past meaningful experiences or periods when they lived in Israel. The Facebook groups feature myriad nostalgic posts along these lines, as well as posts by visitors to Israel who try to compare the Israel of the television shows with the real-life filming locations. The TV shows provide a repeat glimpse and a return to meaningful experiences, as well as an additional vehicle for ongoing connection with Israel. As noted, (in the quote above), the shows "spark" the Jew in everyone.

Another Jewish subgroup for whom one would expect the serial dramas to meet a similar Jewish-identity need has been characterized by Sylvia Barack Fishman.⁹⁰ The group in question is that of **young Jews who are active and connected to their Jewishness and to Israel, but who experience a more complex range of feelings about Israel.** For example, a young woman from this affiliation group says in an interview that Israel is, for her, a place that both symbolizes

the most meaningful and fulfilling experiences of her life, and elicits unease and alienation, due to the contradiction of basic values in which she believes, and a cultural distance that she has trouble bridging. The TV shows appear to be a means of connection that is well-suited to this group, first and foremost

due to **the simultaneous connection and distance from Israel that they offer**. For faraway viewers, the connection to Israel is controlled and less intensive, obviating the need to cope with complex emotions. The connection is partial and short-term, and therefore less demanding. Moreover, at least some of the programs deal with feelings of complexity and ambivalence regarding Israel. This is also true, as we noted in the previous section, regarding the major changes in content found in today's Israeli television shows, which often tackle complex social problems in Israeli life. In this sense, the American woman quoted above is sociologically similar to Israeli creators (most of them from the political left) who give expression to a similar difficulty. The serial dramas echo some of the ambivalence noted by the young Jews in this group, and as such they can offer these Jews an appropriate vehicle for authentic connection.

Another important group is that of young Jews who say that their connection to Israel is cultural⁹¹ (rather than national or religious). On the one hand, cultural connection itself is perceived as Jewishly weak. On the other hand, cultural identification seems to be on the rise among young people and should therefore be treated as meaningful. The television shows provide a glimpse of, and connection to, Jewish-Israeli culture, and as such they are also of service to Jews whose identity is primarily cultural.

At this point, it is important to clarify the nature of American Jews' Jewish connection to Israel. Beyond the important place that Israel occupies in Jewish identity, US Jews' attitude toward Israel is marked by complexity. Israel is the Jewish state or the state of the Jews, it is a tangible place in geographic space, but it is also an idea and a symbol, a desired destination, and an object of eternal longing. This is what it was for all Jews during two millennia of exile. In this sense, Zionism created a rift in Jewish philosophy of place, by transforming this "place" from an **idea** into a **physical, tangible, and earthly location**. In American Jewish thought, this duality regarding place remains. When American Jews say, at the end of the Passover seder, "Next year in Jerusalem," they are expressing their yearning for a place, for Jerusalem as Yerushalayim shel maalah (heavenly Jerusalem) – Jerusalem as part of a Jewish consciousness and as an

abstract idea. Jerusalem as a Jewish symbol exists in an eternal, ahistorical sphere. Accordingly, American Jews often regard their relationship with Israel as something abstract. It is an identity-related, emotional, and ideological relationship, and as such is not oriented toward physical presence in a place. Thus, for many American Jews, various ideological variations of Jerusalem and of Israel are a deep identity-related need that has to be met – not by physically going there, but rather through a spiritual, abstract relationship with it.⁹²

Based on the above, the Israeli serial dramas are a "Jewish-Israeli" consumer good, one that meets needs on the emotional, consciousness, and identity planes with regard to Israel and American Jewish identity. As a television-based consumer good, the shows are a simple and tangible element; however, that element coexists with the American Jewish spiritual ideal regarding Israel as a place – an outlook that views Jerusalem as a Jewish symbol and an abstract spiritual essence. This combination reveals the deep need embodied in the "consumption" of the programs, the consumption of "Jerusalem" from a distance, as an abstract, intangible or physically accessible space. The TV shows meet an identity-related need both as popular consumer goods, and as expressions of the idea of Jerusalem and Israel as abstract places, Jewish spiritual symbols that can also be "reached" from afar, through ideas and through cultural affinity.

The principle that one Israeli series = multiple Israeli series

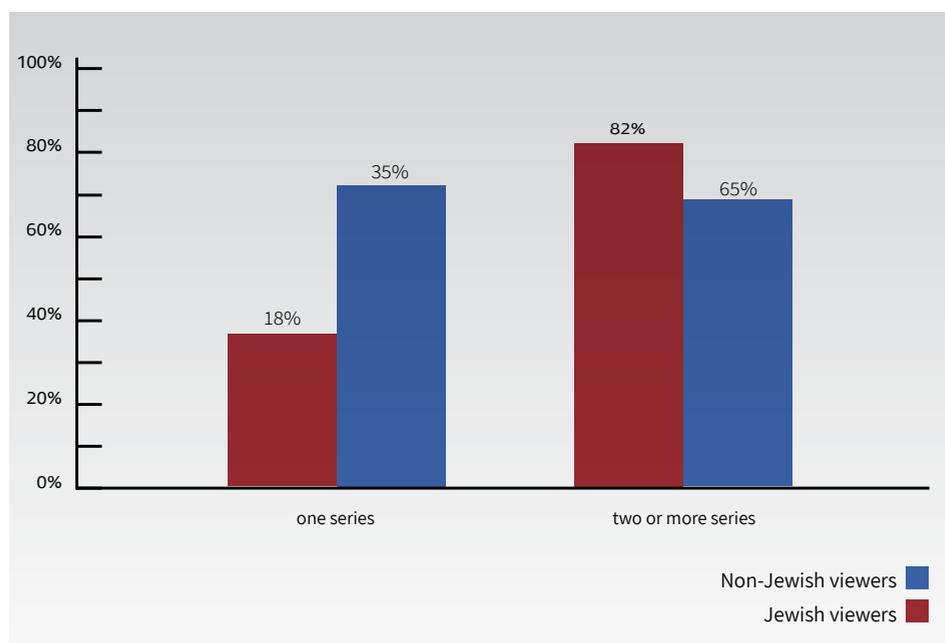
One outstanding testament to identity-related need is the "one Israeli series = multiple Israeli series" principle. The idea is simple: viewers of one Israeli TV show tend to watch multiple Israeli shows. Thus, interest in a series is actually linked to the fact of its being an Israeli series. This principle emerged as a major finding both in our survey and in the social media fan groups. The format of the social media posts is typically as follows: the poster expresses admiration/enthusiasm for an Israeli series and asks others to recommend another Israeli series. Even when the wording is more general, as when the poster asks for

recommendations for a similar show, nearly all of the recommendations will be for other Israeli programs. To take a random example: in the *Shtisel* Addicts Facebook group, a poster with two obviously Jewish last names wrote: "After watching that amazing series, I just finished watching the *Baker and the Beauty*. Very entertaining! Can anyone recommend another series?" The post received 37 responses, containing recommendations for the following shows:

Srugim (8), *Fauda* (4), *HaMidrasha* (3), *Hostages* (3), *The Good Cop* (2), *When Heroes Fly*(2), *Our Boys*(1), *Unorthodox*(4).⁹³ Only two responses also mentioned non-Israeli series. Although this was a random post, it is representative of many similar posts that frequently appear in the relevant groups.

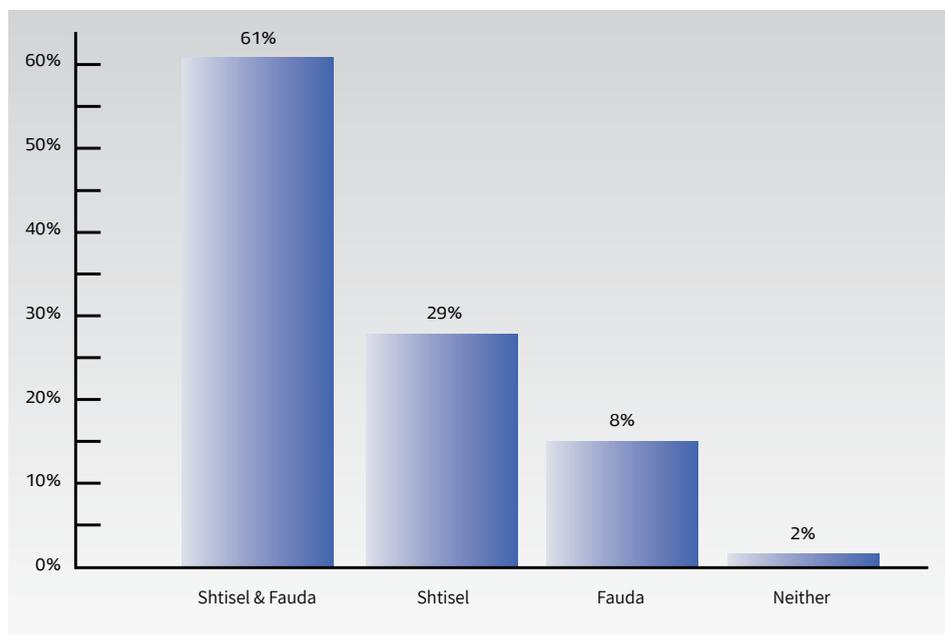
We cannot always know for certain which group members are Jewish and which are not, although in some cases, as in the aforementioned post, the person's Jewish identity is clear.⁹⁴ Also, in the TV shows survey the "one Israeli series = multiple Israeli series" principle was seen to apply to Jewish viewers. Figure 9, for instance, shows that, compared with non-Jewish viewers, the Jews watched more Israeli shows.⁹⁵

Figure 9: Watching Israeli Series: Jewish versus non-Jewish Viewers



Most of the Jewish respondents had watched more than one Israeli series; one should note that the issue is not one of theme or genre (i.e., related to the topic of the series or its genre). The shared characteristic is the shows' Israeliness and the fact that they deal with Israeli society. Although *Fauda* and *Shtisel*, for example, are profoundly different, most of the survey respondents had watched both series (see Figure 10). The high degree of overlap itself indicates interest in Israeli programs per se. Although both *Fauda* and *Shtisel* are excellent and exceptionally well made, they are exceedingly different in terms of genre, story, and even in television production terms. *Shtisel* is a slow-moving family drama that takes a somewhat impressionist approach to the portrayal of a Haredi family on the Israeli periphery. By contrast, *Fauda* is a hard-core action show, realistic in style, that follows the everyday war waged on Palestinian terrorists by a tough masculine undercover unit. In terms of genre, there should be no such close overlap between the two series' viewers; the main explanation for this overlap is interest in Israeli shows per se. Essentially, the shows answer the same deep need for identity affirmation among American Jews seeking contact and connection with Israel as a meaningful element of their Jewish identity.

Figure 10: Audience Overlap Between *Fauda* and *Shtisel* Among Jewish Viewers



Jewish unity in a time of polarization

"Jewish tradition encourages Jews to think of themselves as an extended family; by reaching into the most extreme and insular corner of the Jewish world to find universal themes, *Shtisel* sends the message that, despite everything, they still are."⁹⁶

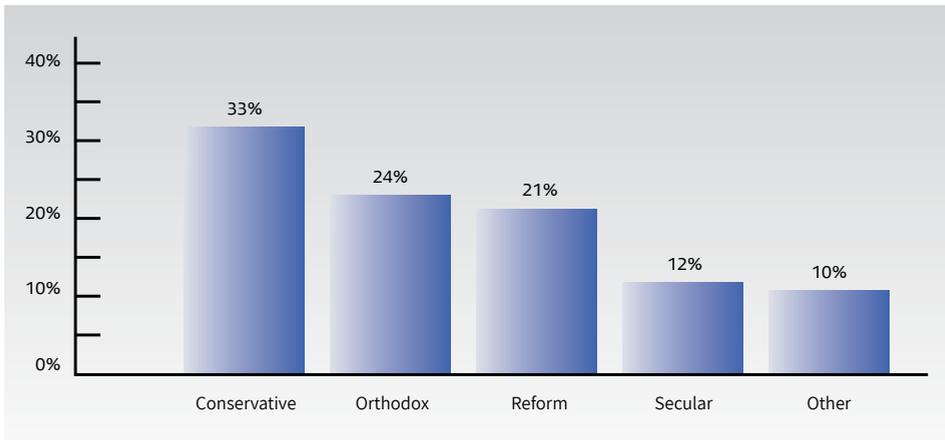
Against the background of *Shtisel's* tremendous popularity in the US (among Jewish viewers), Peter Beinart has argued that the show offers a narrative of Jewish unity, and that this is a narrative that American Jews currently find appealing.⁹⁷ The Haredim, with their exclusionary and foreign (and "too-Jewish") appearance, were once perceived as a threat to the narrative of American Jewish integration (Woody Allen's Film *Annie Hall* and Philip Roth's Short Story *Eli, the Fanatic*). However, now that that integration (of Jews in America) has been achieved, American Jews are more concerned about the rifts that are tearing the community apart. Today, the most axiomatic Jewish fear is that the Jews are becoming strangers to themselves. Ties between Jews from different circles – secular, Reform, Orthodox, and Haredi – are weakening, and the community is feeling the strain. Support for this narrative of intra-Jewish polarization can be found in JPPI's Polarization Index.⁹⁸ Today, the American Jewish community, like American society in general, suffers from deep polarization. It was also found that the polarization is largely intergenerational. Older and younger Jews differ about the nature and quality of Jewish identity and practice, with younger people tending to identify less and to be less engaged with Jewish practice. By contrast, *Shtisel* – an Israeli-Jewish television show – sparks authentic Jewish emotion, a sense of Yiddishkeit as well as a sense of general human identification. Although *Shtisel* tells a particularist Jewish story deeply anchored in a Haredi neighborhood of Jerusalem, it is also a universal story about interactions in a patriarchal family, about love and marriage. It has appeal among Jews of differing religious and communal affiliations (see Figure w) who love the series and talk about it, and this may ease polarization concerns and reinforce an alternative Jewish narrative of unity and family ties.

Although the question remains open of whether *Shtisel* offers only solace, a kind of "cold comfort," rather than a remedy or solution to the polarization threat, the show's calming effect and the sense of "imagined solidarity" it creates are themselves beneficial. The term "imagined solidarity," patterned on Benedict Anderson's "imagined communities," refers to the two main elements of this phenomenon.⁹⁹ There is a solidarity dimension: Jewish discourse around the TV show and on Jewish customs and cultural elements. Events devoted to the series, often with its actors in attendance, at synagogues and clubs (tickets are in high demand and sell out quickly), and, as Beinart suggests, it evinces a familial-tribal feeling that goes beyond the *Shtisel* audience and is relevant to the American Jewish community as a whole.¹⁰⁰ On the other hand, and as Beinart also notes, many of these viewers do not know "real" Hasidim or Haredim, and the Jewish connection that remains is essentially "imagined." Just as Anderson argues that nationalism, though an imagined phenomenon, is nevertheless meaningful as a social-psychological force, here one can attribute meaning to the Jewish solidarity sparked by *Shtisel* and later, perhaps, by other Israeli series.

At a liberal-progressive synagogue in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area – Mishkan Torah in Greenbelt, Maryland – the community has organized *Shtisel* screenings for communal viewing. Every Sunday, community members who self-identify as Conservative or Reconstructionist Jews gather at the synagogue and follow developments in the life of the Haredi *Shtisel* family in Jerusalem's Geula neighborhood. After the screening and social interaction, the synagogue's rabbi gives a talk on the episode and on Jewish customs that featured in it. There is something refreshing about the virtual "encounter" between the Jerusalem-based Haredim and the liberal Jews of Washington. The Facebook group discussions can be viewed in the same way. As seen in various posts, the identity of the members is a matter of interest to many in the group. This is true of non-Jews, and it is also true with regard to the various religious Jewish streams. Figure 12 shows that, when respondents in this study's survey were asked how they had first heard about the show, most answered "by word of mouth." This attests to the existence of a "Jewish discourse" revolving around

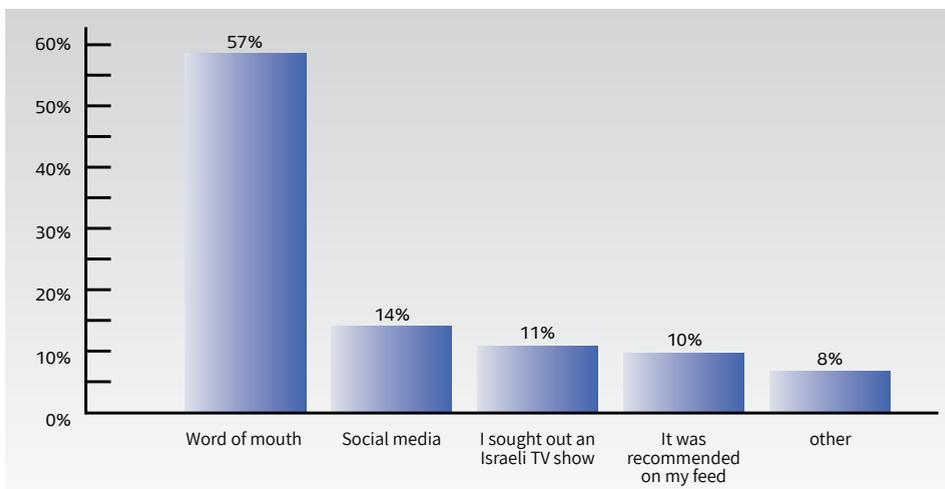
the television dramas. Although this is a discourse that takes place within circles of affiliation, and not between circles, its simultaneous existence in different communities is significant. Parallel discourse on the Israeli series indicates a trend toward **some kind of commonality and consensus**. Such a discourse constitutes an island of solidarity within a polarized and divided community.

Figure 11: Jewish Religious Affiliation



The graph indicates identity diversity with respect to Jewish religious affiliation.

Figure 12: How did you initially hear about the TV show?



We can see that most of the survey respondents said that they had viewed the programs based on "word of mouth" recommendation, signaling a unifying Jewish discourse has emerged around the Israeli TV drama series.

Israeli drama series as an instrument of soft power: *Our Boys* as a case study

"When I hear calls for artistic censorship in Israel, I ask: How are we any different from them? A free and democratic society is one that allows itself to criticize itself."¹⁰¹

Joseph Nye, in his extensive exploration of the concept of "soft power," has referred to culture and cultural creation as a form of soft power.¹⁰² Cultural creations can disseminate values and awaken feelings of identification and support within a country or nation. And indeed, as we have seen, the Israeli television dramas have positive effects with regard to the Jewish world and Israel. The shows are a vehicle for strengthening Jewish identity and identification with Israel and Judaism. They generate a shared Jewish discourse, while related Facebook discussions go beyond the programs themselves and deal with Israeli and Jewish reality. The shows broaden Jewish and non-Jewish viewers' knowledge of, and familiarity with, Israel and the Jewish world, and they place Israel on the global stage in a fundamentally positive and sympathetic light.

One important point that bears reiterating is the new complexity in Israeli TV representations of characters and of Israeli life. This refers to the more humane and accepting attitude toward the "other," and even toward the enemy. We found that this new complexity contributes to the shows' popularity. However, while a series such as *Fauda* represents Israeli life in a complex and nuanced way while still clearly serving the Israeli perspective, there are shows that explicitly criticize the State of Israel or Israeli conduct on various issues, generally ones that are security related. *Our Boys* is an example of this kind of critical show. As such, it can illuminate the tension embodied in the Israeli-television discourse as a soft power discourse and help us determine what sort of approach to take to the shows with a view toward policy recommendations.

When *Our Boys* debuted, then-Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called it "an antisemitic show that soils Israel's reputation." This statement harks back to the once-common view that TV shows should be public relations ambassadors for

Israel, and agents of soft power. But this opinion does not reflect the social and cultural changes that have occurred in Israeli society – changing conceptions of the nature of the state and citizen-state relations, as I have noted above. In particular, this approach runs counter to the essence of art and cultural freedom and is not suited to the spirit of the "age of television," when viewers (worldwide) are accustomed to complex and even critical representations. Thus, as we have argued above, television shows that represent Israel in a superficial way, or that show it to be "perfect," will probably fail to generate interest, and may even be regarded as simplistic or inauthentic.

Artworks and cultural creations can be employed for diplomatic purposes, but one must remember that the decision to do so is external to the work itself. The main impetus behind cultural productions is not diplomatic, but artistic. Moreover, the commercial motive is prominent in the television medium, and today's quality TV dramas represent a clear integration of both of these motivating factors.¹⁰³ As I have noted, the shows are considered to be works of art, but they operate within an economic market framework driven by considerations of profit and loss. Thus, even if the serial dramas actually serve as soft power agents and promote a positive image of Israel or benefit the Jewish people, one must remember that these are byproducts, not part of the shows' essence or "natural" function. Such an attitude toward the programs could thus undermine them and their international success, a positive development in and of itself; in so doing, they would ultimately compromise Israeli soft power. **What is important, therefore, is to identify the shows as spontaneous agents of soft power, and not to predefine them as such, or try to impose that function on them.** Culture-mediated diplomacy sees the added value, the "soft power," primarily in art itself, and not just in the message it conveys. This means that the dissemination of Israeli artistic work abroad is itself the main diplomatic value; such dissemination positions Israel as a land of creative and artistic freedom, and as a contributor to humanity and to culture generally.¹⁰⁴ In all of these senses, including that of "soft Israeli power," **it is important that critical discourse be permitted, and that there be no interference in artistic**

activity – which, for our purposes here, means the creative processes involved in the production of Israeli television dramas.

Furthermore, despite Netanyahu's criticism, public discourse also encompassed a variety of outlooks on the "service" that the show does or does not provide. For instance, the creator of *Our Boys*, Hagai Levi, said¹⁰⁵ that the series (also) places Israel in a positive light by showing how the legal and governmental authorities, rather than giving up, determinedly act to find the Palestinian boy's murderers and do not "sweep" the truth "under the rug." He notes that, in reactions he had received from all over the world, reviewers expressed esteem for this Israeli resolve. In his view, the show also conveys Israeli national resilience, based on the very decision to conduct a self-accounting, to investigate, to reflect on and contend with the murder.

Emily Nussbaum, the *New Yorker's* esteemed television critic, also notes the series creators' courage in addressing the problems and placing them on the public agenda.¹⁰⁶ Nussbaum emphasizes that, beyond the glimpse of local Israeli society and culture that *Our Boys* affords, the series deals with a general, universal phenomenon – with conformity, incitement, the power of the crowd and its impact on the individual. She explicitly states that these problems exist in the US as well.

Nussbaum also stresses her high regard for the series from an artistic point of view. The show's high quality is indeed worthy of note. The professionalism and the artistically impressive product also serve, in their own right, as a kind of soft Israeli power. *Our Boys* has garnered acclaim and professional esteem throughout the world. At home, it won 14 Israeli Television Academy awards, including Best Drama Series Award for 2019. Beyond Nussbaum's laudatory review, the *New York Times* television critic Mike Hale included it in his best foreign shows list, alongside *Fauda*, *Shtisel*, and *Prisoners of War*.¹⁰⁷

Another important issue is that of Israeli-Jewish dialogue and, in particular, American-Jewish dialogue. The willingness to deal with the topic and cope with the problems strengthens the dialogue with American Jewry, especially

with the Democratic-liberal-progressive camp with whom the relationship has weakened in recent years, due to an ideological rift. In addition to providing an important channel for positive contact with young American Jews, a frank and open critical discourse of this kind also justifies the soft power of an Israel that prides itself on being the sole liberal democracy in the Middle East. As noted by *Tehran* director Daniel Syrkin in the above quote, "A free and democratic society is one that allows itself to criticize itself."¹⁰⁸

To this may be added the natural balance that exists in the television drama market.¹⁰⁹ While moderately critical views and a complex approach to Israeli life also feature in such popular shows as *Fauda* and *Tehran*, the extreme critical stance of *Our Boys* makes it the exception that proves the rule. *Our Boys* is hard to watch and is not representative of the Israeli television drama mainstream. Most Israeli serials do not present outlooks that are critical to this degree, nor do they take unequivocal political stands. By contrast, intervention/restriction of artistic freedom creates the mistaken impression that Israeli dramas are "partisan" – a perception that could potentially undermine the professional status of the shows and their creators.

To all of the above, a note on Israeli cultural policy should be added. In a comprehensive study of the topic, Edna Harel-Fisher¹¹⁰ proposed *mamlachtiyut* or statism as an organizing principle of Israeli cultural policy. Per this principle, the state is obligated to support the arts and culture, and to assist individuals and groups within society in the realization of their unique creative-artistic-cultural endeavors. However, the state should not cultivate an "approved" or partisan art that would serve a favored ideological outlook. Governmental support should be given with no supervision of content or intervention in the artistic process – yet the state should, nonetheless, help establish cultural values and foundations of identity.¹¹¹ A well-founded cultural policy is a major issue of relevance to the topic at hand, but it also goes beyond that topic, relating to general regulatory patterns of support and state-culture relations. What is important for our purposes is the recommendation for a policy that enshrines the funding of culture and distinguishes between funding and the various aspects of artistic and cultural freedom.

It is important to understand that even if the Israeli television dramas ultimately function as a kind of soft power, **most of that power lies the shows' spontaneity and complexity, not in any deliberate public relations effort.** In this sense, the shows' complexity and even the critical views they convey and the way in which they highlight problems, the conflict and, at times, the lack of solutions to complicated situations, are what elicit identification and a perception of authenticity from viewers. Unlike stereotypical characters, simplistic pronouncements, and neat divisions into good and bad, these programs stimulate thought and promote honest and controlled debate about the "situation." It is precisely in this context of "PR" activity embodied in the television dramas' "subconscious" that that "subconscious" should be preserved. The moment it becomes overt public relations and diplomacy, its artistic power will be lost, the aesthetic and emotional experience ruined, and the sense of complexity that is responsible for a significant proportion of the shows' success will evaporate. Regarding programs like *Our Boys* that criticize Israeli society, one should remember that, in addition to the critical elements, this series also depicts an Israel which, though complex and difficult, is nevertheless human. Overall, we have seen that the Israeli serial dramas have a mainly positive effect on Israel and on the Jewish people. In any event, **it is important that the spontaneous character of this endeavor be preserved, and that there be no interference in its content or attempts to formally enlist the shows as diplomatic actors.**

Policy Recommendations

This study has shown that the Israeli drama series under discussion have a beneficial effect across a variety of parameters related to Israel, the Israeli population, and the Jewish people. Beyond the issue of Jewish and Israeli pride in these successful productions, the shows have had an impact in the following areas:

- Strengthening the relationship with Israel;
- Promoting a positive perspective on Israel;
- Reinforcing Jewish identity and identification;
- Knowledge acquisition and learning about Judaism and the Jewish people;
- Knowledge acquisition and learning about Israel and Israeli society;
- Bolstering Jewish solidarity and creating a shared "Jewish discourse" that transcends communities and religious affiliations.

This cumulative significant positive effect points us to several policy recommendations:

1. Non-interference in the professional field

- The research clearly shows that the television dramas serve as agents of soft power, both Israeli and Jewish. However, as we have clarified, a major element of the shows' success and popularity abroad is the complex and nuanced perspective they offer on Israeli reality. This perspective is linked both to the international market/economic interests, and artistic considerations.¹¹² Market conditions dictate complexity, as today's audiences seek complex, non-superficial productions; and art is naturally oriented toward the most complex outlook possible. The shows may sometimes hint or explicitly reference critical stances regarding Israel. However, the main effect is that of a complex depiction of Israeli life – a depiction oriented not chiefly toward criticism but toward acceptance and reflection of Israel's complex and complicated situation. The recommendation, therefore, is to **allow**

this complexity and not to interfere in the professional sphere. The Israeli television dramas should be identified as independent and spontaneous agents of soft power, and not predefined or forcibly tasked with the communication of diplomatic messages. This recommendation is also consistent with the spirit of the statism principle in cultural policy as discussed above.¹¹³ The hope is that, in the near future, a comprehensive cultural policy along these lines will be implemented.

- Regarding foundations that support culture on behalf of the governmental institutions, it is important to uphold the principle of governmental non-interference. However, we must also recognize (as part of our cultural policy) that culture needs support and funding.¹¹⁴ With regard to television serials, funding can promote additional development while also preserving and maintaining prior achievements and ensuring that these achievements do not go to waste in the global marketplace. Furthermore, we should not rule out measures to encourage and incentivize addressing social issues – but there should be no interference in the work of the creative personnel, the way in which the material is processed, or the production/product details. There certainly should be no "planting" of viewpoints, and an effort should be made to ensure balance and diversity in the relevant foundation or council appointments, so that no tendentious or political/governmental interests are served.

2. Strengthen Israel-Diaspora relations

- Following the idea to encourage and provide incentives for creation on selected issues and without intervention in the doing itself, and for the purposes of this study, content dealing with Israel – diaspora relations should be encouraged. Putting the issue on the agenda today will help strengthen the relationship between Jews outside of Israel, and Israel. This is particularly true with regard to current trends of disconnection and criticism, as well as the growing distance between the communities.

- Another importance of dealing with this issue, relates specifically to the Israeli perspective. Although American Jewry's trend toward distancing from Israel is intensifying, that distancing is actually mutual. Moreover, a comparative view shows that it is Diaspora Jewry, and in particular American Jewry, who are invested and involved in learning projects and projects aimed at deepening their ties to Israel, Israelis and Israeli culture. On the Israeli end, by contrast, there are no parallel plans for promoting familiarity with and knowledge of American Jewish culture. To take a prominent example, there is no "Birthright" for Israelis interested in getting to know and understand American Jewry. Many Israelis, and certainly those in the governmental sphere, still take a negative or even a disdainful view of the Diaspora Jewish world.¹¹⁵ Introducing Israelis to Diaspora Jewry and to Jewish culture outside of Israel is important, and one may assume that this would fill a serious lacuna in Israeli Jewish cultural education. In general, cultural activity in the form of stories (narratives) about the ties between Jews and Israelis, and on questions of Jewish culture and its connection to Israel, is important. The goal would be less to have an impact of some kind (since, as noted above, this is not the essence/main objective of the television shows) than to put the wide range of non-Israeli Jewish identities, and the importance of engagement with Jewish culture, on the Israeli agenda. Of relevance here is a JPPI paper¹¹⁶ on the Israeli TV documentary series *The New Jew*¹¹⁷ that recommended organizing a continuation show – a documentary reality series that would look in greater depth at how a diverse array of American Jewish families live. The inspiration for this is the Israeli Families Project series that showed Israeli viewers Israeli families of various kinds along Israel's tribal, multicultural continuum. The series featured discussion about shared Israeli values and about the particularist values represented by each family; time was also allotted to the "personal" – the individual perspective of each interviewee.

- In light of the Israeli serial dramas' significant positive effect, the recommendation is to encourage educators and activists who work with Jews outside of Israel to make use of the shows as meaningful and engaging content in their work. It is advisable to introduce teachers, instructors, and other contact people to this content, and to encourage them to use the television programs as reference material at conferences and in instructional activities for Jewish community members. In order to set such an effort in motion in the near future, a collaboration should be considered between the Jewish People Policy Institute, the Ministry of Diaspora Affairs, and Jewish Agency madrichim on the preparation of guided lesson plans for viewing the shows. It should be emphasized that thematic and social variety in the choice of programs is desirable, for purposes of exposure to multiple aspects of Israeli life, including "regular" life, and in order to broaden and deepen the sociocultural discourse on the basis of the television shows.
- **## critical discourse as a Jewish – Israeli soft power**

As a follow-up to the two main recommendations above, non-interference in the professional development of creators and strengthening the ties between Israel and Diaspora Jews, it's necessary to re-emphasize that to a certain degree, critical discourse about Israel (from within Israel) also constitutes a type of soft power, in that it demonstrates the freedom of expression and the democratic values that characterize Israel as a free society.

A critical discourse that does not deny the state's legitimacy is a discourse that suits Israeli society today, given the extensive changes that that society has undergone since Israel was founded. The idea of culture as representing a state-sanctioned outlook or as an element of social cohesion has eroded in Israel, in favor of a viewpoint that recognizes culture as a critical tool.

This kind of critical discourse also promotes dialogue with Jewish groups outside of Israel, the basis for such broad Jewish discourse being the two aforementioned assumptions: recognition of the State of Israel's legitimacy, and a readiness for critical discourse rooted in values of freedom of expression and democracy.

3. Conduct follow-up research

United States:

The recommendation is to conduct follow-up research focused on American Jewish subgroups lacking deep connection or ties to Judaism or to Israel. Expanding the research to include these groups, which constituted a minority in the present study, could provide support for the preliminary and partial findings obtained with regard to them. This would lead to further recommendations vis-a-vis these groups, especially with respect to their relations with, and connection to, Israel.

Israel:

Regarding the cultural convergence effect in Israeli society, or at least the penetration of the periphery – Haredim and Arabs – into the cultural center: This trend is important for Israeli public discourse, and our leaders need to be aware of it and to consider how this "cultural penetration" might be introduced into the country's political discourse and political culture as well. The coronavirus pandemic has certainly worsened the polarization between the aforementioned subgroups and the rest of Israeli society, thereby undermining or muting the sense of closeness and solidarity generated by the television shows and undercutting the shows' positive impact. The recommendation here is for public opinion research, including focus groups, to study how the drama series affect Israeli viewers' perspectives regarding Haredim and Arabs in Israel.

Appendix 1

From the About section of the "*Shtisel*" -Let's Talk About It Facebook group

We started this group so we could discuss all the questions we had about the Israeli TV show "*Shtisel*" and because we thought others would also be enthralled by the show and would have as many questions and thoughts to share as we did. While keeping our focus on "*Shtisel*" we sometimes mention (but do not discuss in detail) other Israeli TV shows and Israeli films, especially those in which "*Shtisel*" cast members appear. There is also discussion about the Haredi lifestyle and how the Haredi community relates to broader Israeli society. Most, but not all, of our members are Jewish. Our Jewish members are a very diverse group, representing a broad spectrum of Jewish backgrounds, religious beliefs and observance. Our discussion is a friendly, respectful, judgment-free zone. We use language that is respectful of non-Jews as well as Jews. We do not talk about current events except as specifically related to the story. Our discussion contains spoilers, because most of us have watched all 24 episodes. We ask everyone seeking to join the group to answer several questions. After you submit a request to join the group, please check your PMs in the next 24 hours to see if we are trying to get in touch with you to clarify a question we might have about your request. Requests that do not include an affirmative answer to our first required question (concerning our ground rules) will be declined.

Appendix 2

1. What is your gender?

- Female
- Male
- Other (please specify)

2. What is your age?

- 18 to 24
- 25 to 34
- 35 to 44
- 45 to 54
- 55 to 64
- 65 to 74
- 75 or older

3. In what state or U.S. territory do you live?

4. What is your current religion, if any?

- Christian/Protestant/Methodist/Lutheran/Baptist
- Catholic
- Mormon
- Greek or Russian Orthodox
- Jewish
- Muslim
- Buddhist
- Hindu
- Atheist or agnostic
- Nothing in particular
- Other

5. Do you have a religious affiliation?

(Only If your previous answer is "Jewish")

- Orthodox
- Conservative
- Reform
- Secular
- Other

6. In politics today, do you consider yourself a Republican, Democrat, or Independent?

- Republican
- Democrat
- Independent

7. How would you describe your knowledge level about the State of Israel?

- Very High
- High
- Medium
- Low

8. How many times have you visited Israel?

- 0
- 1
- 2
- 3- 5
- more than 5

9. How many years have you spent living in Israel?

- None
- Less than a year
- 1 to 3 years
- 4 to 10 years
- more than 10 years

**10. Do you agree or disagree with the following statement:
Caring about Israel is a very important part of my being a Jew**

- very important
- somewhat important
- not too important
- not important at all
- I'm not Jewish

11. How important is being Jewish in your life?

- Very important
- Somewhat important
- Not too important
- Not at all important
- I'm not Jewish

12. On average, how many hours of TV do you watch a week?

- 1 to 5 hours
- 5-12 hours
- More than 12 hours

13. In the last 3 years, have you watched any Israeli television shows?

Please indicate which television shows you watched:

- Fauda*
- Shtisel*
- Our Boys*
- When Heroes Fly*
- Haven't watched at all*
- Other (please specify)

14. How did you watch the show:

- In Hebrew with English subtitles
- In Hebrew with hebrew subtitles
- In Hebrew without subtitles
- In English

15. How did you hear about the show:

- Word of mouth (friend, family, colleague, etc.)
- Social Media
- Advertisement
- Review
- It was recommended on my feed (Netflix, HBO, Amazon, etc)
- By accident
- I looked for an Israeli TV show
- At a community/public event
- Other

16. To what extent do Israeli TV shows make you feel more connected to Israel?

- To a large extent
- To some extent
- Not at all

17. To what extent do Israeli TV shows make you feel more connected to your Jewish identity?

- To a large extent
- To some extent
- Not at all

18. Overall, has watching an Israeli TV show changed your perspective on Israel positively or negatively?

- Positively
- Negatively
- Didn't change my perspective

19. Which of the following statements comes closest to your view about the image of Israelis:

- When I think about Israelis, I think about soldiers, agents, and spies
- When I think about Israelis, I think about pioneers
- When I think about Israelis, I think about westerners
(people from US, Canada, Europe, etc)
- When I think about Israelis, I think about Ultra-Orthodox Jews
- When I think about Israelis, I think about colonialists/settlers
- When I think about Israelis, I think about high-tech professionals
and entrepreneur
- Other

20. Have you taken part in any chat/thread/discussion/event that relates in a significant way to Israeli TV shows?

- Yes
- No

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2. "Viewers" refers to all viewers of the programs, though the study focuses primarily on American Jewish viewers. See the methodological section below.
3. See the group manifest in Appendix 1.
4. See the survey questionnaire in Appendix 2.
5. Mike Hale, "The 30 Best International TV Shows of the Decade" The New York Times (20.12.19)
6. Shlomo Fisher, "Identity Formation and Expression", in the JPPI Annual Assessment 2015, accessible at: https://jppi.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2015/JJPI_AA2015E.pdf.
7. The historiography of world television begins with a "prehistorical," "experimental" era, starting in the late 19th century with the invention of the first image and sound broadcasting technologies, and ending with the Second World War. Television became a form of mass media and a major social institution in the West during the late 1930s at the earliest, or in the mid-1940s at the latest.
8. Another historical feature unique to Israeli television is that an "experimental educational television project" was undertaken before a general television industry was established.
9. Noa Lavie, Israel produces drama: how Israeli television series became an art, (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2015): 46 [Hebrew]
10. Arnon Zuckerman, *Global Television* (Tel- Aviv: Misrad HaBitachon, 1999):127 [Hebrew]
11. Itay Harlap, *Television Drama in Israel*, (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016): 27
12. Tamar Liebes, "Israeli Broadcast Programing as a Reflection of Society" *Keshet* 25(1999): 88-97
13. Itay Harlap, *Television Drama in Israel*, (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016)
14. Three laws currently regulate Israeli television broadcasting: the Public Broadcasting Law, 5774-2014; the Second Television and Radio Authority Law, 5750-1990; and the Bezeq Law, 5742-1982. Supervisory bodies were created in the framework of the new legislation, such as the Second Authority Council, a public-governmental body, and the Cable and Satellite Council. These councils, along with relevant laws, have regulated and still regulate the various aspects of broadcasting management: advertising times, content, the original/foreign productions ratio, and more.
15. Itay Harlap, *Television Drama in Israel*, (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016): 27
16. The process continued in 2018 with the closure of Israeli Educational Television and its replacement with Kan Educational, part of the new Israeli Public Broadcasting Corporation.
17. The split led to the end of the concessionaire system, in which Channel 2 operated two concessions, Keshet and Reshet, which aired programming on different days. In the new system, two companies received licenses for full commercial broadcasting on the separate channels.

18. Noa Lavie, *Israel Produces Drama: How Israeli Television Series Became An Art*, (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2015): 12; 29-30 [Hebrew]
19. Noa Lavie, *Israel Produces Drama: How Israeli Television Series Became An Art*, (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2015): 12; 29-30 [Hebrew]
20. Itay Harlap, *Television Drama in Israel*, (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016): 28. Harlap defines the first period, from the IBA's creation in 1968 until Channel 2's launch in 1993 as "a single-channel consensus."
21. The funding came from the television tax, the state budget, and sponsors, and each component was limited in some way or other.
22. Itay Harlap, *Television Drama in Israel*, (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016): 28. Harlap defines the first period, from the IBA's creation in 1968 until Channel 2's launch in 1993 as "a single-channel consensus."
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26. Arnon Zuckerman, *Global Television* (Tel- Aviv: Misrad HaBitachon, 1999):127 [Hebrew]
27. Itay Harlap, *Television Drama in Israel*, (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016): 28.
28. Noa Lavie, *Israel Produces Drama: How Israeli Television Series Became An Art*, (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2015): 53 [Hebrew]
29. The television market exhibited unprecedented growth during this period, alongside regulatory legislation and new technologies. Professionalization was evident in all aspects of the field. For a discussion of these institutional changes, see Lavie, chapters 3 and 6.
30. Yuran in Harlap, Itay Harlap, *Television Drama in Israel*, (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016): 38.
31. Itay Harlap, *Television Drama in Israel*, (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016): 42.
32. Noa Lavie, *Israel Produces Drama: How Israeli Television Series Became An Art*, (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2015): 53 [Hebrew]
33. It is important to note that traditional, non-critical, less-complex content continues to be aired alongside the new content. However, the major development and trend is that of the rise of complex and critical high-quality programs, as noted and as shall be clarified below.
34. In effect, the dominant Mapai party had maintained its complete control of the country's social and political institutions as shaped by the Achdut HaAvoda (Labor Unity) party during the Yishuv period.
35. The liberal citizenship approach, and the Lockean civil society are oriented toward civil equality and concern for minorities/the disadvantaged, while also placing the individual at the center of society and the state.
36. Gershon Shafir and Yoav Peled, *Being Israeli: The Dynamics of Multiple Citizenship*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006)

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38. Eyal Naveh and Esther Yogev, *Histories: Towards a Dialogue with Yesterday*. (Tel Aviv: Babel, 2002)
39. Anita Shapira, *New Jews Old Jews*, (Tel Aviv: Am – Oved, 1998): 43.
40. Noa Lavie, *Israel Produces Drama: How Israeli Television Series Became An Art*, (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2015): 90 [Hebrew]
41. Itay Harlap, *Television Drama in Israel*, (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016): 42
42. Anita Shapira, *New Jews Old Jews*, (Tel Aviv: Am – Oved, 1998): 82.
43. As well as many other programs mentioned above such as *Muna* (2019), *The Writer* (2015), *Avoda Aravit (Arab Labor)* (2007) with regard to Arabs, and the series *Merhak Negiya* (A *Touch Away* – 2007), *Kathmandu* (2012), *Shababnikim* (2016-), *Commandments* (2017), *Matir Agunot* (Unchained – 2020) with regard to Haredim.
44. On the image of the Arab in Israeli theater – and in Israeli culture generally – see Urian, 1996. The foregoing applies to the image of the Haredi as well.
45. Itay Harlap, *Television Drama in Israel*, (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016): 24. Harlap analyzes the discourse of trauma and victimhood in the shows *Parashat HaShavua* (2006-2009), *BeTipul* (2004-2007), *Nevelot (Eagles)* – 2010). In his analysis he demonstrates the growing complexity and the new representations of Israeli men transformed from fearless, macho fighters into complicated characters moving within circles of trauma and victimhood.
46. This is demonstrated by the fact that the left has also expressed criticism of the representations in the series, see, Kobi Niv, "Our Boys is a Masterpiece of a terrible lie", *Haaretz* [20.10.2019] [Hebrew].
47. As well as many other programs mentioned above such as *Muna* (2019), *The Writer* (2015), *Avoda Aravit (Arab Labor)* (2007) with regard to Arabs, and the series *Merhak Negiya* (A *Touch Away* – 2007), *Kathmandu* (2012), *Shababnikim* (2016-), *Commandments* (2017), *Matir Agunot* (Unchained – 2020) with regard to Haredim.
48. The foundations, as noted, are related to the transition to liberal discourse, but in reality they have reinforced ethnonational discourse by strengthening various periphery groups. For more on the foundations' role in shaping Israel's television drama landscape, see Lavie, Ref. 12, 89-90.
49. And this may also testify to the legitimization they received from the audience, against the background of widespread acceptance.
50. Noah Slepkov, Camil Fuchs, and Shmuel Rosner, "Pluralism Index," JPPi (2020), accessible at: [https://jppi.org.il/en/article/Pluralism Index/#.YjbRWhBBwUE](https://jppi.org.il/en/article/Pluralism%20Index/#.YjbRWhBBwUE).
51. Except for *Commandments* and *Unchained*, these shows have also been broadcast abroad and are currently available there. *Unchained* was recently sold to the Australian SBS network.
52. Noah Slepkov, Camil Fuchs, and Shmuel Rosner, "Pluralism Index," JPPi (2020), accessible at: [https://jppi.org.il/en/article/Pluralism Index/#.YjbRWhBBwUE](https://jppi.org.il/en/article/Pluralism%20Index/#.YjbRWhBBwUE).

53. Ruth Margalit, "Seeing inside the Israeli Ultra- Orthodox Community on the Netflix Series "Shtisel", *The New Yorker*, (14.4.19)
54. Maya Polak, "Culture Itself", *Makor Rishon*, (10.03.20) [Hebrew]
55. Itay Harlap, *Television Drama in Israel*, (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016): 48-49.
56. Karin Alde, "The people of Israel live in Bing". *Haaretz* (18.9.20) [Hebrew]
57. In *Treatment*, which aired for three seasons and won major awards. Gabriel Byrne won a Golden Globe Award, while Dianne Wiest and Glynn Turman won Emmy Awards. A new (fourth) season is currently in production in the US, in the shadow of the coronavirus pandemic. While large-scale productions are hard to reconcile with the pandemic restrictions, the economical Israeli format in which most episodes consist of two actors being filmed in a room, is particularly well suited to present conditions.
58. Mike Hale, "The 30 Best International TV Shows of the Decade," *The New York Times* (20.12.19)
59. Ed Poer, "How Israel became a global power in television," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, (3.6.20)
60. Israeli TV & Film group (private group), post from 1.10.19
61. The viewers were asked to name the original Israeli shows they had watched over the past three years.
62. For example: *Shtisel*, *Srugim*, *Beauty and the Baker from the list*, and other series such as *Shababnikim*, *Ramzor*, and *Yellow Peppers* (a partial list) that were not mentioned in the survey but are also available abroad.
63. This is in line with the representations presented in Israeli films and serials. The change here partly overlaps with the change that took place in Israel; see our discussion in Part 1. In contrast, however, to the content shown in Israel, the foreign audience viewed a limited number of American films by foreign artists.
64. S.J. Whitfield. "Israel as Reel: The Depiction of Israel in Mainstream American Films". In *Envisioning Israel: The Changing Ideals and Images of North American Jews*, ed. Gal, Alon (Jerusalem: The Zionist Library, 1999), 31-48.
65. Gitit Levy-Paz, "Beyond the Distancing Discourse: Israel in American Jewish Culture", JPPI Annual Assessment 2018, accessible at: <https://jppi.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/AA2018E.pdf>
66. David Halbfinger, "Fauda an Israeli tv hit, lets viewers escape into the conflict", *The New York Times*, (22.5.18)
67. David Caspi, "Lost in Hollywood", *Israel Hayom*, (12.11.2020) [Hebrew]
68. Yasmeen Serhan, "Watching Israeli TV's Fauda as a Palestinian", *The Atlantic*, (8.6.18)
69. As the series creator, Yehonatan Indursky, noted: "The outlook that Haredim live in a kind of ghetto and are just waiting for the day they can escape – it's an occupation fantasy for secular people." See: Ruth Margalit, "Seeing inside the Israeli Ultra- Orthodox Community on the Netflix Series "Shtisel", *The New Yorker*, (14.4.19)

70. Shai Secunda, "Nuclear Family", *Jewish Review of Books*, 7:2 (Summer 2016); Peter Beinart, "Unpacking the Immense Popularity of Shtisel", *The Atlantic*, (20.6.19)
71. See, in the Fauda group, posts from 7.11.18, 19.6.18, 18.7.18, and 26.3.19. See also Ref. 71 above and, with regard to Haredim, see the Shtisel – Let's Talk About It group, posts from 21.1.19, 23.6.20, 24.1.20, and many more.
72. Nir Yahav, "Fauda is the Middle East Narcos", *Walla* (31.12.19) – quote from interview with Fauda director Rotem Shamir.
73. See the Fauda group, posts from 5.7.18, 26.3.19, 4.2.20.
74. Shayna Weiss, "Frum with benefits: Israeli Television, Globalization and Srugim's American Appeal", *Jewish Film & New Media* 4 (2016)
75. The series was first broadcast on the Israeli Yes Stars network in 2009; in 2009 the first season was aired on Channel 2 as well. The second season was broadcast in 2010 on the Yes network, and later on Channel 10.
76. Hagit Burg, 2013. *Films and T.V Series of Religious Creators as an Expression of the Tension Between Modernism and Religion in the Religious Zionist Society*, Ph.D. Thesis, Bar-Ilan University
77. Shayna Weiss, "Frum with benefits: Israeli Television, Globalization and Srugim's American Appeal", *Jewish Film & New Media* 4 (2016):77- 84
78. See "Shtisel" – Let's Talk About It, posts from 3.4.19, 7.7.19, 26.6.20, 2.5.20.
79. *Ibid*, 20.7.20.
80. From the "Shtisel" – Let's Talk About It group, response from 28.6.20.
81. *Ibid*, 16.8.20 and 28.4.19.
82. See "Shtisel" – Let's Talk About It posts from 8.4.20 and 15.6.21.
83. Nir Yahav, "Fauda is the Middle East Narcos", *Walla* (31.12.19) – quote from interview with Fauda director Rotem Shamir.
84. Steven M Cohen. "From Jewish People to Jewish Purpose". *The New Jewish Leader*, edited by J. Wertheimer, 45-83. Waltham, Massachusetts: Brandeis University Press, 2011; Jack Wertheimer, "Mapping the Scene – How Younger Jewish Adult Engage with Jewish Community". *The New Jewish Leader*, edited by J. Wertheimer, 1-44. Waltham, Massachusetts: Brandeis University Press, 2011; Pew, 2013: Ch. 5-6.
85. For non-Jewish Americans there may also be an emotional-religious connection based on Israel's sacredness to Christianity, especially to Evangelicals, but we will not take up the issue here.
86. Shlomo Fisher, "Identity Formation and Expression", in the JPPI Annual Assessment 2015, accessible at: https://jppi.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2015/JPPI_AA2015E.pdf.
87. See the Fauda fan group post of 26.6.18 on the BDS effort to have the series boycotted, and a similar discussion from 26.4.20.
88. Tal Ariel- Amir, "Wanted: what Hamas think of Fauda? *Ma'ariv*, 13.05.2015[Hebrew]

89. My emphasis. Personal correspondence with Mimi Markofsky, admin of the "Shtisel" – Let's Talk About It Facebook group.
90. Sylvia Barack Fishman. "Reimagining Jewishness- Younger American Jewish Leaders, Entrepreneurs and Artists in Cultural Context". *The New Jewish Leader*, edited by J. Wertheimer, 159-213. Waltham, Massachusetts: Brandeis University Press, 2011
91. See the recent Pew surveys (2013 and 2020) for data on the rise of cultural Jewish identification among young American Jews.
92. Gitit Levy-Paz, "Longing as a Jewish Force", *Makor Rishon*, (15.03.2020)
93. Although Unorthodox is not an Israeli series, it is considered to be a Jewish show and features numerous Israeli actors, in particular Shira Haas who is associated with Shtisel.
94. In this case, the last name was Cohen. See the post from April 5,2020 in the Facebook group Shtisel Addicts.
95. In the survey, we showed the respondents a list of four series: *Fauda*, *Shtisel*, *Our Boys*, and *When Heroes Fly*, as well as an "other" option asking for the names of additional Israeli series that the respondents had watched. Some respondents may have related solely to the four series listed, without adding other shows that they may in fact have viewed.
96. Peter Beinart, "Unpacking the Immense Popularity of Shtisel", *The Atlantic*, (20.6.19)
97. Beinart, *Ibid*.
98. Inbal Hakman, "Integrated Index: Polarization in Israel and US Jewry", JPPI Annual Assessment 2020 accessible at: <http://jppi.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/AA2020E.pdf>
99. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (Tel- Aviv: Tel-Aviv University, 1999)
100. Suzanna Dressler, "How Shtisel Sparked a Religious Yearning in a Secular Jew", *Jew In The City*, (23.05.19)
101. Riki Rat, "Studies, Scandals, 8200", *Makor Rishon*, (23.6.2020) [Hebrew] – interview with *Tehran* director Daniel Syrkin. [Hebrew]
102. Joseph S Nye, *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*. (New York: Basic Books, 1990); Joseph S Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. (New York: Public Affairs,2004); Joseph S Nye, *The Future of Power*. (New York: Public Affairs/Perseus Book Group, 2011)
103. Noa Lavie, *Israel Produces Drama: How Israeli Television Series Became an Art*, (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2015) [Hebrew]
104. Edna Harel - Fisher, *Mamlakhtiyut in Israel's Cultural Policy*, (Jerusalem, The Israeli Democracy Institute, 2020): 171. Rafi Gamzou, a former Ministry of Foreign Affairs Director-General who was in charge of Israeli cultural diplomacy, is quoted in the study: "The perception of Israel as a producer and exporter of quality, complex culture is the right approach."
105. Ariel Horovitz," I take responsibility for the first episode, even if it is damaged", *Makor Rishon*, (22.8.2019) [Hebrew]

106. Emily Nussbaum, "Our Boys" And the Economics of Empathy, *The New Yorker*, (16.9.2019)
107. Mike Hale, "The 30 Best International TV Shows of the Decade" *The New York Times* (20.12.19)
108. Riki Rat, "Studies, Scandals, 8200", *Makor Rishon*, (23.6.2020) [Hebrew]. See also Herzog's 2018 study on delegitimization. The study attributes to US Jewry and to the dialogue with it an important role in the effort to counter BDS supporters. Critical television dramas that do not shy away from open discussion of "problems" in Israeli society appear to be a major factor in communication with American Jews, even constituting a weapon of sorts in the fight against BDS.
109. It should be noted that this balance is subject to change, though one may reasonably assume that such change would not be absolute or immediate.
110. Edna Harel-Fisher, *Mamlakhtiyut in Israel's Cultural Policy*, (Jerusalem, The Israeli Democracy Institute, 2020)
111. The study provides a detailed rationale and justification for the enshrinement of support for culture and artistic freedom. The statism principle is the common thread that runs throughout the study and the policy proposal. The principle establishes the idea of protection of culture both in terms of funding, and with regard to governmental intervention; it views culture as a public good for all citizens. Statism is also conceived as a means of bridging gaps between Israeli culture's uniquely Jewish-national character, and the forces of multiculturalism. Additionally, it is proposed as a liberal-democratic response to the multiplicity of rifts and subgroups within the state.
112. Paradoxically, these two factors stand in contradiction to each other – capitalistic-economic considerations and aspirations to artistic/cultural excellence. The contradiction is embodied in the concept of a "cultural product." The term "product" comes from the sphere of economics and markets, while "culture" refers to art and to lofty artistic aspirations that, on the surface, are unconnected with the economic/commercial element.
113. Edna Harel- Fisher, *Mamlakhtiyut in Israel's Cultural Policy*, (Jerusalem, The Israeli Democracy Institute, 2020)
114. See also Avner Shavit, "Nobody thought the series would succeed and suddenly Hillary Clinton tweeted bout it", *Walla*, (11.5.21)– interview with the Danish screenwriter Tobias Lindholm (Borgen, The Investigation), in which he discusses the direct link between governmental funding policy and the global success of Danish television shows. This relates to the idea of ensuring and maintaining success.
115. JPPI has already addressed the issue and rejected that outlook in its Israel-Diaspora dialogue publication of 2018. Formally, there has indeed been a change in attitude toward the Jewish world; see former Jewish Agency head Natan Sharansky's 2010 statement on the Agency's changing priorities (strengthening the Jewish community rather than promoting "aliyah" to Israel). There has been a terminological change as well: Jews of the Golah, or Exile, have become Diaspora Jews (the Golah was considered a "negative" term; Diaspora is not). On the ground, however, these developments have yet to make themselves felt. Further evidence of Israelis' general lack of interest in Jewish culture outside of Israel,

besides the data included in the Dialogue publication, can be seen in Israel's literature curriculum and in the paucity of non-Israeli Jewish authors who appear in it.

116. Gitit Levy-Paz, " Jewish Families Project", JPPI (2021), accessible at: <https://jppi.org.il/en/article/jewish-families-project/#.YjHRtxBBzBI>.
117. The series was produced by Kan 11, in cooperation with, and with financial assistance from, the Jewish Agency, the Ruderman Family Foundation, the Gesher Multicultural Film Fund and the Maimonides Fund, the AVI CHAI Foundation, UJA-Federation of New York, the Jim Joseph Foundation, and Shazor.