<center>**DIBATTITI E RECENSIONI**</center>

<center>**Key elements of the Israeli society**
di Lorenzo Kamel</center>

Each culture has certain "key elements which, in an ill-defined way, are crucial to its distinctive organization" (Ortner 1979, 93). Elon (1993, 4) claims that Israel's identity has four constitutive strands: religion, nationalism, the Holocaust, and liberalism. In the following I will elaborate and discuss all four related values or defining themes, i.e. Jewish identity, Zionism, the Shoah, and liberalism in Israel. Even though the remembrance of the Shoah is not a "value" in the strict sense of the concept, it has crucial implications on many aspects, ideas and values of the Israeli society. For this reason it could be opportune to include this aspect in the present topic.

a) Jewish identity

The distinguished Israeli sociologist Eisenstadt (1974) claims that Israel has a Jewish identity. It is one of the defining themes of the State of Israel. This is determined, first of all, by the fact that according to the Law of Return enacted in 1950 every Jew has an immigration right and the possibility to gain citizenship. So, Israel is not only the state of its citizens but of all members of the Jewish people all over the world. In addition, the State actively pursues to bring Jews to Israel with operations like *Flying Carpet* in Yemen or *Operation Moses* in Ethiopia, with the Russian immigration wave or with special benefits for people who immigrate, and with programs like *Taglit*.
Second, the national holidays, the calendar, and the weekend are in line with the Jewish tradition. Also, the national airline – El Al – does not operate on Shabbath and serves kosher food. Third, there is no division between religion and state, on which I will elaborate more in the next section.

b) Liberalism

Israel not only has a Jewish, but also a democratic identity. Specific liberal values in Israel are laid down in the basic laws of the State. However,

these values are sometimes incompatible with the Jewish character of the State, and sometimes they are violated regarding minorities within Israel.

Regarding the first contradiction, in Israel, notoriously a step forward about the preservation of democratic rights within its borders, a Jewish wife cannot decide to divorce without the permission of her husband. Women in fact have the chance to appeal to the religious tribunal which, if conditions for a divorce are satisfied, has the authority to make pressure on the husband, so that he concedes to the divorce, through instruments that range from the withdrawal of the driving license to imprisonment. In fact the existence of religious courts is special to the Israeli legal system. "The Israeli legal system is distinct among liberal democratic legal systems for its use of various personal status laws in the area of family law applied by religious courts. This phenomenon has historical and political roots stemming from the Ottoman rule, and was retained by the British authorities during the Mandatory era" (Shultziner 2009, 23). However, in contrast to this, Justice Aharon Barak claims that "'Jewish and democratic' does not imply two opposites, but rather their being complementary and harmonious… The fundamental values of Judaism are the fundamental values of the state." Others, like Justice Haim Cohn think that only principles from the Jewish tradition should be chosen which are in compatibility with democratic values (both quoted in Elon 2008).

Second, liberal freedoms are not consistently applied, especially not in relation to the Arab minority. Ben-Porat shows that the "gradual relaxation of Israeli policies towards Arab citizens has not diminished the social gaps between them and the Jewish majority's economic, social and political marginalization" (Ben-Porat 2009, 6). Shultziner (2009) claims that also today the "civil rights of the Arab citizens of Israel are far from equal to that of their Jewish counterparts, even though they are equal de jure." In certain circumstances the Palestinian citizens of the State of Israel do not receive the same social services as the Jewish citizens. This is connected to military service, which is the main measurement of who is considered a 'good citizen' as Ben-Porat (2009, 6) shows.

c) Zionism

Avineri reminds us that Zionism was a revolution in the Jewish diaspora. He enlightens the paradox that before Zionism emerged, there was a paradox in the Diaspora: "on the one hand a deep feeling of attachment to the Land of Israel, becoming perhaps the most distinctive feature of Jewish self-identity; on the other hand, a quietistic attitude toward any practical or operational consequences of this commitment" (Avineri 1981, 4). The Zionist movement

only appeared in the second half of the nineteenth century. Moshe Maor shows that, in contrast to general opinion, anti-Semitism was the trigger, but not the cause for Zionism. Zionism stemmed from the "need to construct a Jewish national life in response to modernity" (2009). He also shows the existence of different streams of Zionism, i.e. practical, political, spiritual, cultural, religious, labor and revisionist Zionism. A. B. Yehoshua said that some speak about some Zionism that is "true" and others about a Zionism that is "human" or "big" or "original" (Yehoshua 1996, 40). Thus this is a concept that is not univocal, but often characterized by radically different perceptions. So, what is Zionism and how did the concept develop? Till the foundation of the State of Israel, any person who wanted to found a Jewish state on the land of Israel was considered a Zionist. Today, once that the state has been created, the definition changed and a Zionist is someone who wants to recognize that the State of Israel does not only belong to its citizens, but to the entire Jewish people (see also Yehoshua 1996). In any case, a person who calls himself a Zionist does not reveal much about himself. It does not explain his relationship with religion, with the problematic of the state, with the thematic of social inequalities, with the issue of the occupied territories and so on. However, Zionism has also been subject to challenge and change. In the late 1980s, many intellectuals and scholars, among them the so-called new Israeli historians, emerged claiming that the Zionist paradigm and the "official historiography" that alimented it gave birth to a selective vision of the Jewish history, which should bring in itself to a teleological end and a linearity that cannot be demonstrated.

d) The Shoah[1]

Elon (1993) describes how there first had been a "stunned silence about the revelations of the Holocaust." This was also due to the prevailing logic of a relevant stream of Zionism, according to which the Diaspora was a disgrace:

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[1] It is important to note that many scholars have clarified the intolerability of the term "Holocaust." It derives from its ambiguity as a euphemism and an intimation that the events in question could possibly have sacred meaning. This is mainly due to the etymology of the word "Holocaust" as a burnt sacrifical offering. However, there is not agreement about the use of a single explanatory term. Commenting a passage of a book written by Giorgio Agamben, Dominick LaCapra provided the following analysis: «"The Jews also use a euphemism to indicate the extermination. They use the term *so'ah*, which means 'devastation, catastrophe' and, in the Bible, often implies the idea of a divine punishment". But what about the term 'extermination'? Was this not a term employed by the Nazis – a term that is far from unproblematic? Is it not a component of the discourse of pest control if not bare or naked life? The point that I would like to make is that no term is unproblematic for 'the events in question'. The best (or 'good enough') strategy may be both to recognize that there are no pure or innocent terms (however 'purified' by critical analysis) and to avoid fixating on one term as innocent or as a taboo. Instead, while being especially careful about unintentional repetitions of Nazi terminology, one might employ a multiplicity of terms (Holocaust, Aushwitz, Shoah, Nazi genocide…) in a flexible manner that resists fixation while acknowledging the problem in naming» (LaCapra 2004, p. 169).

"Jewish victims of Nazism were often thought to have gone 'like sheep' to the slaughter" (Elon 1993). However, the State of Israel built a national place for remembrance – Yad Vashem - in 1953. Also, in 1951, the national Holocaust remembrance day (Yom Ha'Shoah) was introduced. First it was considered to constitute this day on the day of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, but eventually is now eight days before the Israeli Independence Day. We can perceive these initiatives as an "attempt to take back the Shoah from the perpetrators and make it serve the victims (perhaps figured as martyrs) or their descendants" (LaCapra 2004, 147).

Today, Asher Arian (1995) claims that Israel suffers from the "people apart syndrome", which leads them to analyze everything happening to them through the lens of persecution that the Jews suffered in their history. Tom Segev's (1993) book "The Seventh Million" represented a strong rupture in this respect. He studied how the Holocaust has been molded and used for political ends by the Zionists committed to the process of building a Jewish State, as well as by the leaders who came to power later. He pointed his finger against the instrumentalizations made among others by then Prime Minister Menachem Begin, who by writing to American President Ronald Reagan once said that he would send "the Israeli army to Beirut in order to capture Hitler in his bunker". The Hitler to which Begin referred was Yassir Arafat. Thus he instrumentalized the Shoah by making it a political argument. Segev's claim, however, is controversial in Israel and his book was sharply discussed. In addition to this, it is important to note that no other event in history offers such radical resistance to every attempt to uncover some meaning in it. Indeed, as noted by Christian Meier, "every attempt to discern meaning can seem like an after-the-fact insult to the millions of victims" (Meier 2005, 137).

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