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## The Israeli People, With a Capital 'P,' Demand Social Justice

Collective Action at the Heart of the Mass Demonstrations

## By Leonard Fein

Thanks to the wonders of modern technology, I was able to watch, in the comfort of my air-conditioned living room in Boston, the entire September 3 protest rally in Tel Aviv via a live stream provided by the Israeli news website, YNet. (By way of contrast, my Israeli friends, who were there in the flesh, faded after an hour or two and then made their longish way home.)

I have several times quoted here the leading chant of the protesters, rendering it "The People demand social justice!" I need to call attention to and explain the capitalization of "People." The word "ahm" in Hebrew does not mean "people" (lower case), as, for example, anashim would convey. It is a specific reference to the collectivity. Hence it would be wrong to render the chant as "The people demand social justice," suggesting an aggregation rather than a specific entity. Accordingly, "The People."

And the collectivity was very much on the minds of those who addressed the rally, almost all of whom spoke of "solidarity" as one of the keys to its rousing success, which was nothing less than the largest rally in Israel's history, with crowds gathering not only in Tel Aviv but also in Jerusalem, in Haifa, in Kiryat Shmoneh and Afula and Bet She'an and Eilat and a dozen other places around the country, somewhere between 420,000-450,000 people in all.

There was much talk of "the new Israelis," by which attention was called to the end of indifference and cynicism, to the insistence that the kind of Israel that has unfolded over the course of these last 63 years is inadequate to the hopes and aspirations of masses of people. That, obviously, is the big news of the protest process. It is as if, quite unexpectedly, the flag of classic Zionism, long since tucked away in a dresser drawer while historians and journalists wrote casually of the "Tel Aviv bubble," had been picked up, aired out and now claimed by a new generation.

Among the speakers, the one who came closest to articulating the potential portent of all this was actually of an earlier generation. He was oratorically the most phlegmatic, though he was also perhaps the most storied of the participants and the one with genuine precedent on his side. His name is Moti Ashkenazi. In 1973, during the Yom Kippur war, his was the only position along the Bar Lev line (intended to prevent an Egyptian assault against Israel) that did not fall to the Egyptians. Ashkenazi was outraged by what he saw as a series of calamitous decisions by Israel's political echelon, decisions that had led to many casualties and, until the Nixon/Kissinger resupply to Israel, a serious threat of defeat. So he began a one-man protest in front of the prime minister's home, a protest that eventually attracted sufficient support to force the Golda Meir government (which included Moshe Dayan, who initially dismissed the protest, saying "The people have said their piece, and no demonstration or rally will bring down the government") to resign.

Ashkenazi — whose own story may well not have been known by the masses of young people in Tel Aviv — was blunt: "What is needed is not a change in the system; what is needed is a change in the culture." I am not certain what Ashkenazi intended thereby, but if I can infer his meaning from the remarks of the other key participants — especially Itzik Shmoli of the National Union of Israeli Students and Daphne Leef, the original solitary protester whose action just seven weeks ago kicked off the entire movement — the cultural changes that are now required include not only the engaged energy of ongoing protest but also, and more specifically, a refusal to make peace with the immense gaps in wealth that have come to characterize the country — gaps between the super-rich and everyone else, though especially the bottom quarter of Israel's population; gaps between the urban centers and the peripheral towns; gaps between Jews and Arabs; gaps in medical care, in housing, in education, in every sector. A refusal, as

well, to accept the galloping privatization that has been a hallmark of the Netanyahu administration.

One of the catch-phrases of recent years has been "ein lanu eretz acheret": we have no other country. Leef was explicit in her dismissal of that phrase: "We are here not because we have no other country; we are here because this is where we choose to be." And then much about being here, in this country repurposed, reinvented, a country of equity and dignity, a country beloved by the protesters.

I cannot report all this, as encouraging as it is, without wondering why there has been no comparable protest in the United States, where our political leadership seems no less out of touch than Israel's patently is. Here, income inequality is even more skewed than in Israel; here, since 1980 and Reagan's presidency, the welfare state has been dismantled, piece by piece, leaving the poor more locked out than ever and the middle class slipping into reverse; the data are a madness. Here, it seems, we, too live in a bubble.

For Israel, for America: Sandburg ends his classic, The People, Yes with "In the darkness with a great bundle of grief the people march. In the night, and overhead a shovel of stars for keeps, the people march: 'Where to? What next?'"