

Jewish Family & Life!

## **Inside Israel**

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877-568-SHMA www.shma.com TODAY, the old, standard juxtaposition in Israel between Jews who are "religious" or "secular" is blurred and outdated. New, enticing forms of creativity and innovation among Israelis with regard to expressing and living Jewish lives — in addition to the indefinite and icy status quo with Palestinians, a growing resentment at the power of the Orthodox, and a swelling of the Russian immigrant community (now some 20 percent of Israel's population) — are creating a spirited mood and thirst for experimentation. This issue of *Sh'ma* draws on myriad Israeli voices in an effort to explore, evaluate, and debate these new trends and what they mean for Jewish identity in Israel.

## **Individual Voices and Collective History**

Basmat Hazan Arnoff

JUST AFTER I WAS DRAFTED into the Israeli army eighteen years ago, a young Israeli writer named David Grossman published a book about the Holocaust. The name of the book was *See Under: Love.* At the same time, a popular young rock musician, Yehuda Poliker, released the album *Dust and Ashes.* And Orna Ben Dor released her documentary *Because of That War* about Poliker and his partner Yakov Gilad making music about the Holocaust as descendants of Greek and Polish families murdered by the Nazis.

These were the artistic works that changed the lives of my generation. Coming of age in Israel in the 1970s and 1980s, living in a country that was still trying to understand how to experience the memory of the Holocaust, my friends and I were accustomed to relating to the Holocaust in grand, untouchable terms like "destruction," "disaster," and "martyrdom." From first grade on, our teachers had struck our ears with the words of terrifying songs and stories. We had seen awful photographs. We had heard, often by accident, the shadow conversations of grown-ups describing medical experiments on human beings, how the Nazis had made soap out of Jews. Each year we sang anthems and prayers to commemorate unexplained and unexplainable losses.

Seemingly from nowhere came three fresh, beautiful, creative works offering a completely new perspective on the Holocaust. Grossman, Poliker, and Ben Dor wrote, sang, and spoke about the Holocaust in "our words" — a new vocabulary and sound that related the experience that had directly shaped our lives, but until then had never truly been discussed. The Holocaust had been the property of the survivors, not us. Then a few artists created an opportunity to actually feel the Holocaust after having lived with its invisible toxic heat, the aftermath of its radiation.

Many artists later joined this wave of creativity and strengthened and changed the ensuing dialogue, but I always remembered that *See Under: Love* had shaken me to the core.

I recently began directing a theatrical adaptation of the second of four sections of *See Under: Love*; it is called *Bruno*. As I began the project of bringing *Bruno* to the stage, I reentered the edginess and the madness of the book. Unlike the reading as a teen, I now saw the text from the perspective of an adult artist. I began to see new visions within the story, understanding for the first time that the journey undertaken by the hero of *See Under: Love* is a path toward redemption.

See Under: Love is a secular, Israeli book attempting to make sense of contemporary Jewish history. I began the process of adaptation — with a group of students from The School for Theater Arts at the Kibbutzim College (the Israeli equivalent of an MFA program) — by closely studying the book in a "theatrical beit midrash." Through immersion in Jewish and non-



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Jewish traditional and contemporary texts, we are building an aesthetic vocabulary that will serve the actors throughout the collaborative experience. Through the lens of pluralistic Jewish study, we intend to bring to the stage the journey of Shlomo Neumann, the hero of *Bruno*, a second-generation survivor of the Holocaust, as he moves toward his personal redemption. When I was a theater student, the idea of bringing Jewish text study to a group of secular actors would have seemed radical or distant. Today, secular students are excited to meet within a textual conversation for creative, rather than specifically religious, engagement.

A quiet revolution is slipping across Israel's secular/religious divide. Jewish study is now seen as a way of balancing and enriching contemporary creative dialogue. Slowly, divisions are breaking down, particularly in the realm of the arts, and it is becoming clearer that differences in lifestyle and understanding can enrich partnerships, that rigid identities stifle creativity. It is now possible to be a secular Israeli who is open to the study and influence of Tanach just as it is possible to be a religious Israeli and make good theater. Paradoxically,

in an Israeli society where ideological boundaries between political, social, religious, and racial groups are still apparent, some cultural divisions have blurred.

Living in Israel at the beginning of the 21st century is not simple; economic hardship, security threats, and political and social pressures sometimes leave people little room to breathe. But almost 60 years after the establishment of the State, there are growing cultural fusions that have never been here before. Israel emerged from a Zionist vision emphasizing the collective over the individual voice. Now individual voices seeking roots, identity, tradition, and family history and culture are louder, clearer, and more acceptable. Personal creative expression is retelling collective history in modes that urge all of us to replace the extremes of stereotypes and slogans and silence with a dynamic language breathing new meaning and soul into our public life. If conflict is the driving force behind all great theater and art, perhaps in Israel, where conflict exists on so many levels, the arts have a very special role to play: Israeli art forges beauty and meaning out of struggle and leads us to new ways of redefining ourselves.

## Jewish Folklore: Humanistic Values and Pluralistic Venues

Eli Yassif

Eli Yassif is Professor of Hebrew Literature and Jewish Folklore at Tel Aviv University. He has published extensively on Jewish folklore and medieval Hebrew literature. He is currently Director of OFAKIM [Horizons], the honors program for the study of Judaism as Culture at Tel-Aviv University.

May 2006 Sivan 5766 To subscribe: 877-568-SHMA www.shma.com FOLKLORE IS one of the richest and most interesting fields of human creativity and, at the same time, one of the most misunderstood. The term is used by all, for all purposes — as "low" culture, as a production of lies, as degrading artifacts. And yet we are all proud of the folklore of our ancestors: "Oh, in our village there was such a rich folklore, today — nothing survived" is a common parlance one can hear everywhere.

The sources of these controversies are mainly two-fold: the difficulty to define folk-lore and the fact that it exists in every community all over the world and existed always, wherever a human community expressed itself in tale, song, dance, sculpture, or ritual.

Folklore is the most pluralistic avenue of human creativity, providing an opportunity of expression to each and every member of society. Traditional communities officially bestowed individuals with communal authority to express themselves: religious leaders, the learned, "ancient families," elders, the wealthy and powerful (and of course, all males). But folklore, through its open, pluralistic, simple, and common means of expression — myth, tale, proverb, riddle, ballad, lullaby, dance, and costume — provides members of the community with a means of expressing their hopes, needs, tensions, fears, and wishes.

If we want to understand the hidden depth of a society, not only the thin layer of the learned that is documented, studying and understanding its folklore is a key tool. All layers of society struggle to express themselves, and human culture throughout history gave way to different, even opposing, means of expression. Embracing pluralism offers an opportunity to enter myriad gates of wisdom, expression, and creativity. This is particularly true in Jewish culture, because of its long history, diversity, and the animosity it suffered from other cultures and religions.