

AS AN ISRAELI living in the U.S. for many years, I have learned to admire and feel comfortable in both cultures and societies. I appreciate the varieties of spiritual and cultural connection that American Judaism offers, and I am excited and moved to see how the people often referred to as “secular” Israelis are grappling with new “identity” questions. Since 2000, I have been conducting research on this phenomenon; I have participated in study and prayer groups and have interviewed a number of leaders and participants. The desire for connection and the search for meaning have evolved as a result of changing perspectives toward contemporary Zionism and the sociopolitical situation in Israel. The creativity and multiplicity of voices and connections, which such innovations can generate, present possibilities for a renewed engagement with Zionism and for a lively, more complex, rich and Jewish/Israeli identity, as well as for deeply meaningful connections between Israeli and American Jews.

## Answering a Need for Connection

Since the Yom Kippur War, and especially since Rabin’s assassination, secular Israelis have begun to ask deep existential questions about their life, about why and how they live in a country where they do not feel connected to the rich inheritance of the formational sources and values. Referring to the Lebanon war, one of the leaders of this movement said during an interview: *“I swore to myself that if I came out alive of that hell, I would devote my time and energy to finding out who the people were who created Judaism, what the texts that they wrote were and how they wrote them, and what the connection is between them and the establishment of Israel.”*

These questions have led to a search for meaning and connection to Jewish sources — a previously unprecedented part of the repertoire of “secular” Israelis. Rather than finding simple answers, the questioning uncovered a range of opportunities to reconnect, create meaning, and continue individual and communal exploration through intimate, creative, and open settings for study and prayer.

## Breaking down Barriers


The commitment to deep ongoing exploration and reconnection challenges earlier stereotypes, labels, and dogmas about the

organization of Israeli society. In conversation, a leader of the movement who would have previously been labeled “secular,” defined himself as *“hiloni light,”* literally meaning “secular light”—not seriously secular.

This response points to an openness to a fusion identity. It is neither *“hiloni”* — detached from the Jewish past, living in a new country and culture disconnected from its roots — nor *“dati”* — living a life that follows the guide of halakhah. This new identity rejects the earlier model created by the founders of the secular State of Israel and reshapes it by incorporating attachment to Zionism, Israeli contemporary culture, pluralistic values, and connections to Jewish sources. This redefining renders the old distinction between secular and religious irrelevant.

## Connections with American Jewry

Like secular Israelis, American non-Orthodox Jews are seeking ways to reconnect with Judaism while upholding their American 21st-century sensibilities. While avoiding pat labels, the search for meaning and spirituality is growing, and communal institutions are emerging as appropriate venues for exploring new connections in both Israel and America. Israelis and American Jews are exploring a common heritage and language. They share a common vision that entails connections with Jewish peoplehood, rejecting dogma, building Jewish community, and creatively exploring their heritage.

American Judaism is beginning to be understood in Israeli society and is influencing some innovative trends described in these pages. We have new opportunities for sharing and learning from each other. As we view Israel and Israelis in new non-stereotypical and open-minded ways, and as Israelis begin to blur their own identities, so too are we blurring distinctions between Israelis and Americans who are searching for meaning, community, and roots within Judaism. This points to new directions for creating a common vision fruitfully collaborating in making meaning and exploring our common heritage. 

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