

Minister of Arts and Cultures

Basmat Hazan Arnoff

When Israel turned 30 years old I was in the third grade. My teacher, a special woman with very original teaching methods, devised a project to celebrate “Independence” in which all the children’s parents were invited to tell the story of their families’ *aliyah* to Israel. The neighborhood school was public and Modern-Orthodox; we were 34 children in that class and while some were immigrants, most were sabras — even if only for a generation or two. Every Friday, parents came and told stories about the Inquisition and the city of Mashhad and the journey of Persian Jews to Israel; of the doors of the Second Temple buried under their synagogue of Djerba; of life in China (I still remember the train tickets...) where one family had been exiled during the Shoah; of Italy and South Africa and Yemen and Eastern Europe and more.

Today when I look at the cultural and artistic “map” of Israel, it becomes clear that although Jews amount to no more than a speck of the world’s population, we have gathered in Israel from every corner of the earth. For several decades, Israel has been fusing generations of immigrants with children and grandchildren coming of age in a totally Israeli milieu. Now, our citizenry is comfortable enough to challenge sacred beliefs about what an Israeli identity is and also strong enough to seek out the landscape of our roots, looking for them and integrating them into cultural work as we craft our own contemporary creative and artistic dreams.

This trend of mixing old and new is emerging within every art form; perhaps most obviously in the world of music where the sounds of the broader contemporary world are being combined with wafts of traditional music from home (sounds that might have embarrassed young Israelis during their childhood and teenage years). What is occurring now is not merely a bridge back to “world” music but an intimate link with the *piyyut* and *niggun*, liturgical music composed before modern Israel existed. Throughout Israel singing communities are inviting men and women of all ages, expressions, and approaches to the Jewish faith, and from every stream in the political spectrum, to sit together and sing *piyyutim*.

In theater, poetry and fiction, film, and even in comics and graphic novels, Israelis are creating a contemporary dialogue as they dig for cultural roots. Artists with all of the necessary tools and techniques and knowledge for launching contemporary successes are exploring their families’ and the broader Israeli cultural wells of the past. This process of merging layers of Hebrew language with diverse layers of Jewish and Hebrew culture is creating a vibrant, deep, and smart artistic language that enriches our Israeli cultural moment.

To nurture this cultural renaissance we must address the following challenges:

First, we must welcome the influences of many Israeli communities, especially those whose voices in the mainstream dialogue are often silent. This includes the most recent waves of new immigrants from the former Soviet Union and from Ethiopia, as well as Bedouins and others on the fringes of Israeli society.

Second, we must provide greater resources to “laboratories” for cultural experimentation. Against the lure of popular culture, so often obsessed with sameness and “ratings,” cultural experimentation offers innovative and particularly *Israeli* forms of expression.

Third, we should inject “new blood” into the cultural institutions of Israel while also opening the hearts and ears of these cultural rainmakers to new trends. Too often, Israeli cultural institutions — from theater and television to newspapers and publishing houses — depend on static criteria of secular or religious, pop or highbrow, Ashkenazi or Mizrahi to define popular trends rather than reflecting the diversity that exists here.

Fourth, documenting and archiving (online) the cultural artifacts of traditional and new fusion groups is essential. Building a multilingual archive will provide valuable educational resources for generations to come, in addition to salvaging and preserving our ancestral treasures.

Finally, we must strengthen the dialogue between Israel and the larger Jewish world by creating shared artistic opportunities as well as venues and programs for mutual critique and growth. A healthy flow of performance, film, literature, and more across the world will not only reinforce the creativity within Israel but will model cooperative ventures among Jews within and outside the state. This ongoing


Basmat Hazan Arnoff is the author of Mayyim Hafoochim, a novel, and works as a theater director. Her play, LeShem Yichud, won the award for best ensemble at the Akko Theater Festival. She recently adapted David Grossman’s See: Under Love for the stage in Tel Aviv and New York. Translated by Stephen Hazan Arnoff.

May 2008
Iyar 5768

To subscribe: 877-568-SHMA
www.shma.com

ing collaboration, based loosely in text and tradition, is essential to the livelihood of art and culture making. With the tools of modern communication and technology, we can reach new heights and many more hearts.

Thirty years ago, second and third generation Israelis like me were just beginning to be exposed to the incredible diversity of cultures

our parents and grandparents had brought with them to create a new society. Today, as my generation matures, and we become the gatekeepers of Israeli arts and cultures, we are uniquely charged with the responsibility of using the technologies and our tolerance of the future to integrate visions of today's Israel with the deep roots of its past. 

Minister of Foreign Affairs

Daniel Gordis

It's not that Israel hasn't told its side of the story. It's that Israel has failed to explain that it *is* a story; that its story is *about* something.

The mere notion that a country can be *about* something sounds strange to our contemporary ears, but Montesquieu, among others, said precisely that. Given that Israel will face enemies and be at war for as long as we can currently imagine, and since Israel's enemies are likely to be portrayed as the underdogs by a world that often prefers that Jews play that role, the Foreign Ministry has a mandate to speak clearly — both to the international community and to Jews in Israel — about what Israel is *about*. The challenge is to shift the spotlight, focusing the world's discussion on why the Jews need a state in the first place, what we are busy building.

Israel is, first and foremost, the story of restoring hope to a people who had no reason to hope. Following the Shoah, on what basis dared we imagine a Jewish future? America's Jews were weak. Europe's had been exterminated. The Soviet regime would only grow more oppressive. Palestine's shores were closed to Jewish refugees who had nowhere else to go.

Statehood restored hope. Exiles were gathered. Hebrew was reborn. Refugees became soldiers. The desert bloomed. Victims began to determine their own destiny. A future, suddenly, was possible. Though the prophet Ezekiel wrote that "our bones are dry, our hope is lost" (37:11), Israel's anthem, "Hatikva," proclaimed *od lo aveda tikvateinu*, "our hope is not yet lost." The world needs to understand that Israel is not about sovereignty, or borders. It's about the very possibility of a Jewish future.

As foreign minister, I'd help design a setting in which Israel becomes the place where Jews imagine what they should become. "Why

did these things happen to us?" does not matter. What matters is, "Given that they did, who and what do we need to be?" In Israel, where Jews are blessed and saddled with sovereignty, they can begin to re-imagine what 21st-century Jewishness might look like.

It is through that lens that the Foreign Ministry must help the world understand the agonizing decisions Israel makes. For example, given that Israel has been forced into war (the disengagement from Gaza could have led to a very different outcome for Gazans had their leadership chosen differently), what rights and responsibilities do a people have when its enemies do not recognize its right to exist? How much should Israel risk the lives of its soldiers in order to protect Palestinian civilians, many of whom offer sanctuary to Israel's armed enemies?

The Israeli story is key to understanding the dilemma we face with Sudanese refugees. Some (though not most) are fleeing genocide. What should Israel — still settling Jewish refugees and worried about the decreasing percentage of Jews that make up its population — do? Part of our story is the Torah's command, "You shall not oppress the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." Should Israel just open the border, risking a genuine flood of such refugees? Could Israelis turn them away and still read the Haggadah without shame? Facing that dilemma is what it means to live inside a Jewish story.

Israel's Foreign Ministry must make numerous complex judgments about nurturing relationships with other countries. How will we balance our economic needs and our military prowess with our concern about selling arms to countries whose policies we may abhor, and that our history would suggest we ought not to do business with? When Turkey

Daniel Gordis (www.danielgordis.org) is senior vice president and senior fellow at the Shalem Center in Jerusalem (www.shalem.org.il). His next book, on re-envisioning Zionism for the 21st century, will be published by Wiley this year.

May 2008

Iyar 5768

To subscribe: 877-568-SHMA

www.shma.com