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Democracy of the Common Good

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“Liberalism sought to create a neutral public space within which all parts of society could participate; but it failed because deep within itself, liberalism, like other political philosophies, is characterized by a defined sociological affiliation. To create social solidarity, we need a different kind of politics.”

Liberalism in Israel is on the decline. This is an increasingly known and painful truth; it is painful because liberalism has a long history and singular achievements, and none of us would be willing to give those achievements up. Equal opportunity, equality before the law, basic rights such as the rights to property and freedom of religion and speech and much more. The boundaries of these liberties may be controversial, but their core constitute the foundations that allow us to live shared and worthwhile lives together in society.

Israeli liberalism came to us in several versions: There was the socialist version of the Labor Party; the Revisionist version of the Herut movement; and the version that in many ways is the heir to both of them: the liberalism of individual rights. Today, it appears that the public has abandoned its affection for each of these versions, and what was once a defining political philosophy of Israeli society is now on the defensive.

Why is this happening? Clearly demographic changes are one of the primary forces behind this sea change. The stereotype of the Israeli liberal actually paints a fairly precise picture: most often "liberal" refers to an Ashkenazi, well-educated, secular person from the middle to upper class, who usually lives in the State of Tel Aviv and, most importantly – in a small family unit (the Israeli equivalent of what social psychologists call WEIRD – Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic). In contrast, the rapid birthrate among the ultra-Orthodox, the religious and the Arab populations, along with about a million immigrants from Russia, have significantly changed the demographic balance in the country. It's easy to understand that under these conditions, the liberal position is very quickly becoming a minority.

But this begs a different question: Why does Israeli liberalism usually remain outside of these target communities? If liberalism purports to work for the good of all – that is, if it promotes the good for each and every individual citizen – then why does it remain closed-off within such clearly-defined sociological boundaries?

In the following essay, I will argue that today's liberal ideas are a fairly accurate reflection of liberal sociology. Unlike the Enlightenment belief that humans are rational beings who

determine their political views based on independent and critical thinking, I will argue that the liberal position is, in the final analysis, largely dictated by its supporters' social alignments. Then, I will attempt to characterize an alternative that is beginning to crystallize on the borders of liberalism in all of Israel's social groupings- left, center, and right: what I call a politics of the common good. In other places, it has begun to be called post-liberalism. It is showing up in countries throughout the democratic world for similar reasons and has dramatic implications for the liberal future.

The Global Class

Today's liberals, in Israel, Europe and elsewhere can be described by what the Enlightenment referred to as "citizens of the world." Economically, culturally, and even socially – most liberals are characterized by a universal consciousness that crosses boundaries. But a consciousness that views itself as universal, that is, a worldview that takes into account all perspectives, is in fact also advocating a particularistic consciousness that carries its own limitations. A universalistic consciousness is the province of a certain group of people, those who experience life through the lens of their sociological experience and assumptions. In this regard, the sociology of Israeli liberalism is not very different from liberalism found in other countries. In socio-economic terms, we might refer to this group as the "global class."

To illustrate this argument, let us look at several issues that are at the center of Israeli political discourse. We'll start with religion and state. Historically, religion has been regarded as a central threat to the liberal view, since it attributes authority to G-d and to sacred texts rather than to the autonomous human being. It therefore comes as no surprise that the overwhelming majority of people who hold liberal views are secular. Religious and secular can live together only through compromise: religion will be restricted as a private and communal matter, while the public space will be under secular-civil authority. Or, in short: separation of religion and state.

But that separation comes at a price. Increasing numbers of liberal thinkers have been troubled by the fact that that separation just doesn't work. Religious people argued that public space is not neutral at all and is a reflection of the secular view of the world (or, in popular parlance, secular coercion.) They have therefore demanded that their spiritual world not be limited to their private spaces and rather will have an impact on the entire state. Indeed, Jurgen Habermas, a German philosopher who has led the Critical school, has tried to build a more complex model of religious-secular relations that would not necessarily force religious views of society to remain at home. Similarly, Craig Calhoun, Director of the prestigious London School of Economics, argues that the questions we ask should not be about separation but rather about the proper place for religion in the public sphere. He argues that the vast majority of questions relating to religion and state come from different views of what is good, and it is only through a non-aggressive public discourse that society will be able to reach the necessary compromises.

Now let's move on to the economy. Here, things are more complicated. Pure liberalism emphasizes the liberty of each and every individual. It is not coincidental that the current capitalistic school is referred to as neo-liberalism, that is, liberalism that emphasizes the free

market with a minimum of limitations on individuals and their economic activity. Ostensibly, Israel's socio-democratic view, which is the province of the Israeli liberal left, should be opposed to this economic liberalism. But in reality, social-democracy finds it difficult to generate genuine opposition to the neo-liberal expansion. From a sociological point of view, the global class is an inseparable part of globalization and the neo-liberalism that comes with it, and it usually promotes the domination of capital over questions of the value of the individual, the community, and the environment.

Shimon Peres' New Middle East was the Israeli version of Tony Blair's "New Labour" and Bill Clinton's New Democrats. All of them supported removal of economic barriers and unrestrained membership in the global village, which has been accompanied by growing economic gaps in each country. As Tel Aviv University's Menachem Mautner argues in his fascinating research, Israeli liberals have promoted their economic interests and have thus significantly helped to leave others behind, alienating them along the way.

And now to a discussion of peace. For two central reasons, peace, as it has been promoted up until now, has been rooted in liberal sociology. The first reason was referred to above – economics. Peace as currently proposed has always had strong economic considerations at its core. The Oslo Agreements, which were a moving moment for many of us (including me), were also motivated by clear economic and global interests. There was, and continues to be, great support for the peace process on the part of much of Israel's economic leadership because of the economic opportunities that it could provide – which are often referred to as "the dividends of peace." Most of the public is not part of that vision.

The second reason comes back to the question of identity. People who belong to the "global class," those who are citizens of the world, are quite naturally more open to, more exposed to, and also more sensitive to world opinion. They put more trust in international agreements and in the institutions that promote them. In contrast, the majority of the public, people who do not live with a global consciousness, are characterized by the opposite attitude. They regard the world with suspicion and believe that it threatens their identity. The question of identity also finds expression in liberals' attitudes toward the Land of Israel. In public discourse, the attitude of liberals towards the Land of Israel sounds as if they were talking about a piece of land that we must get rid of, and not as a Homeland that must be torn apart between two peoples.

Conservatism Has Something to Offer, Too

Liberalism has contended that people are rational beings who make their decisions on the basis of reflection and self-interest. But that is inaccurate. At their heart, people are social beings. We are born into families, communities and places that shape us and create the context and, most often, the meaning of our lives. Post-liberalism recognizes this and so, in contrast to the assumptions of the Enlightenment, it views people in their contexts.

From this perspective, it is impossible to leave religion out of the public sphere, since that would mean asking a religious person to approach politics as if s/he were culturally naked, without a reservoir of words and concepts with which they can make order in the world and from which they derive meaning. In a post-liberal world, we really do understand that

leaving our good outside of the public sphere, ostensibly in order to build a neutral space, is both impossible and dangerous. Liberals are absolutely correct that it is necessary to ensure the personal freedom of every citizen with regard to those matters in which religious freedom must be a cardinal value. For example, the demand that people marry in a manner that contradicts their will and belief is an invasion of their most personal space, deeply damaging the relationship between the State and its citizens. But at the same time, many questions of religion and state – public policy on Sabbath and festivals, kashrut, and, within certain limits, modesty – are political questions, which should be democratically determined by the public.

It would appear that in the economic context, too, people are not rational beings who merely attempt to promote their own narrow interests. Economics is not a precise science that can be detached from culture and values. The liberal tradition, which has removed people from their contexts and placed them behind a “veil of ignorance”, has also taken economics out of its contexts – and, in the absence of any cultural anchor, it has allowed a materialistic greed to fill the void left in our public sphere. In contrast, for example, it would be interesting to think about what an economics rooted in assumptions of Jewish culture might be like. Judaism provides a religious-cultural resource that could contribute to the building of an economic system that would put the individual and the community at its center. The Sabbath, which offers the logic of a day of rest and break from commercial activity, is an excellent example of this.

The social democratic logic, even as it opposes its own sociological interest to support the expansion of capital, views the state as the framework and tool for the creation of a welfare state economy and thus offers up a bureaucratic-managerial-centralistic logic instead of a community-cultural-local logic. It supports the creation of a safety net for the weaker classes in society, which is critical for a society that cares about its citizens, but largely ignores the fact that the family and the community provide the first safety nets in our lives. Better criteria for the creation of this safety net would therefore focus on frameworks that are closer to the foundations of daily life, with policies to support them. We need fewer distant frameworks, fewer lineups of experts provided by the state who dictate a single policy, and more frameworks that are connected to the primary needs of different groups and communities. This is true in economic policy, and also in the spheres of employment, health, education, and welfare.

It is baffling that in economics, the field in which conservatism has so much to offer, the right has adopted the neo-liberal logic of competition, in which individuals become detached, without care for how it devastates families and communities. We suffer from economic policies that are either imported from the neo-liberalism of the American right, at odds with classical Jewish intuitions, or social-democratic liberalism, for whom the state is seen as the sole provider of welfare policies, and whose desire to redistribute wealth will consistently be compromised by the left’s sociological affinity for globalization and neo-liberalism.

And the same is true with regard to peace. It is crucial that we broaden the discussion of peace to include additional social groups and expand beyond the same liberal community

and the assumptions that stem from its sociology. A vision of peace rooted in one group's sociology can never win the hearts and minds of a majority of Israelis. Peace is a national interest, with deep and significant Jewish roots. It must be extricated from the ownership of the liberal left and be broadened into as many corners of society as possible. We must always remind ourselves: the words, "Seek Peace and Pursue It," belong to King David. They were not copyrighted as a bumper sticker of the peace camp.

The question of security is the other side of the coin of peace. Surveys consistently reveal that a majority of the Israeli public supports a solution of two states for two peoples yet, at the same time, this majority does not think that there is a partner with which to divide the Land of Israel, and believes that the Arabs continue to reject and therefore threaten the Jewish people's right to self-determination. It's not at all trivial that there are so many Arabs who claim the opposite; that it is the Jews who refuse to divide the Land between the two peoples. This contradiction provides a glimmer of hope with regard to political possibilities, since it would appear that on both sides there are those who accept the basic principle of an agreement between two rights-bearing peoples, believing that the other side is the obstacle to accepting this core moral principle.

With the advent of radical Islam that echoes the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century, we should not minimize the real and present dangers that we face. Post-liberalism frees itself from the sociological tendency towards a "universalist" view point, which focuses primarily on justice and rights. As the research of New York University's social psychologist John Haidt shows, liberals have a clear tendency to almost solely emphasize values that are based on the individual, such as fairness and justice, and to attach minimal importance to the values that strengthen social capital, such as loyalty to the collective. Post-liberalism allows for a more proper balance between the values of the individual and the values of the collective, focusing on both protection of individual rights, but also protection of the collective.

Face to Face Connections

Israeli society has many voices, with different and at times conflicting value systems and concepts of the good. The liberal compromise banishes the good from the public sphere and builds a shared space founded on legal values of justice and equality. That solution is not working. It doesn't work because that solution, in the final analysis, is also based on a particular perception of good; others have different perceptions of good, which they, too, would like to impose on political and public space.

This winner-take-all attitude, the attempt to impose my group's perception of good on the public space of all of us, is a strategy of the fading liberal hegemony as well as its competitors, the rising national religious prominent among them. Everyone wants to paint the public sphere according to their own sense of what is good, at the price of anyone else's claims. This leads to a public discourse that is aggressive and abrasive, full of attempts to subordinate the other's beliefs to my sociology's worldview. It is based on a view of democracy as a game played by majorities and minorities, in which everyone tries to impose his opinion on the other. But such a compromised democratic culture cannot last long, especially not in Israel, where there are such disparate views among so many different tribes. The aggressive discourse is burning us out, and it is unsustainable.

The alternative is a democracy based on the common good. Zionism deserves much credit for building the backbone of our identity, providing us with a language, a purpose, and a meaning to our shared lives. Prices were, and still are, paid in the attempt to turn us all into Israelis – that is, into secular Ashkenazis. But the post-Zionist attempt to eradicate the Zionist glue as central to Israeliness directly contradicts an understanding of the politics of the common good, which can be built only through the good of the different groups in society, Zionism predominant among them. Zionism is a constitutive narrative of Israeli society and provides an anchor of the good for much of the Israeli public. Yet, as President Rivlin has been teaching us, that isn't true for everyone – it's not true for many ultra-Orthodox and it's not true for the Arabs. And even within the Zionist notion of the good, there were and are very different interpretations.

And yet, in spite of the multiple and at times incommensurate views of what is good, we can see with our own eyes the beginnings of a common future within the State of Israel that begins to bring these different worlds together. It is happening among those that turn their heads towards one another. Among them, we see an Israeliness emerging, an alignment with a shared set of values with which all can connect. This is not assimilation. It is precisely the opportunity to be, for example, both an Israeli and an Arab and to hold on to both of these identities, which characterizes the common good: I keep my good, but build trust and relationships with others in society, and there, bottom-up, the common good emerges. It is a good that is softer, less rigid, but very real.

The same process that we see among Israeli Arabs we can see among ultra-Orthodox, religious, Mizrachim, and universalist liberals; the same understanding that we are partners here, and we had better start looking towards each other, instead of looking away from each other, but without compromising who we are. That is the only way to build a real democracy. We must come to the public sphere with all that we are, with all of our identity, and there, based on a politics of relationships between real people with full worlds, we will construct our shared lives.

We are living in a world that has become increasingly dangerous, and suspicion has become an integral part of the fiber of our lives - on an individual, community, and national level. There are real dangers, and there is evil, but it is also true that we are created in the image of G-d. The challenge of navigating between suspicion and trust in humankind is a test for all of us. It is not possible to build a shared home based on mistrust. Living together is a constant process; it is a choice. We open the door, slowly and carefully, to hear the other voices, suspicious but also with anticipation, because at the end of the day, it is impossible to keep the door closed. This is true for the building in which I live, on my street, in my neighborhood, my city and my beloved country.

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