

Could there be an Israeli Martin Luther King?

By Eva Illouz

While many Western democracies were founded on the basis of universalist constitutions (or morphed into that state), Israel, which was envisaged by its founding fathers as a homeland for Jews, has been an ethnic project from the very start. Therefore, while in Europe and the US multiculturalism was a form of democratization of the polity, in Israel it is universalism that represents the only way to overcome tribalism and ethnic-nationalism. The upshot is that Israeli identity politics often only reconfirmed the preexisting ethnic character of the state. The Israeli case illuminates a larger interesting fact: that identity politics do not take the same form or have the same effects everywhere. While they contributed to the democratization of American society, in Israel identity politics have had deeply regressive effects, pitching proponents of identity against supporters of peace and advocates of religion against secularists.

In Israel identity politics have had regressive effects, pitching proponents of identity against supporters of peace and advocates of religion against secularists

What are Identity Politics?

Identity politics is a broad term that has swept up liberal polities from the late 1970s and especially from the 1980s and on.

One of the first documents to invoke the term is the Combahee River Statement written by African-American women in 1978, concerning a struggle to free 750 slaves fought by abolitionist and former slave Harriett Tubman in 1863. The collective was formed by a group of African-American lesbians to differentiate themselves from mainstream feminist emancipation groups. Because these women were lesbian and black, they claimed their needs and struggles were different and should be addressed as such.

“[A]s children we realized that we were different from boys and that we were treated differently – for example, when we were told in the same breath to be quiet both for the sake of being ‘ladylike’ and to make us less objectionable in the eyes of white people. In the process of consciousness-raising, actually life-sharing, we began to recognize the commonality of our experiences and, from the sharing and growing consciousness, to build a politics that will change our lives and inevitably end our oppression... We realize that the only people who care enough about us to work consistently for our liberation are us. Our politics evolve from a healthy love for ourselves, our sisters and our community which allows us to continue our struggle and work. This focusing upon our own oppression is embodied in the concept of identity politics. We believe that the most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else’s oppression.” [\[1\]](#)

This short passage contains most of the major components of identity politics. Perhaps the key sentence is this: “*We realize that the only people who care enough about us to work consistently for our liberation are us. Our politics evolve from a healthy love for ourselves...*” This sentence contains three features or beliefs central to identity politics:

- The lesbian-black group does not count on others to defend their interests. Their existential position and interests are so particular and different from other mainstream groups that they have come to embrace a view of political struggles as lacking the capacity to identify with causes other than one’s own. However lofty political ideals may be, they will reflect the specific social identities and interests of the groups that formulate them and will therefore be inadequate in representing the social

experience of other groups;

- Self-love is no longer a psychological state but a political declaration. Why? Because self-love is viewed as a practical response to the political evil that minority groups suffer from – lack of respect. This is a subtle shift from traditional notions of justice. Not only equality but also respect is now demanded from political institutions. Respect concerns the self, makes psychological demands on social structures and settles more easily with social injustice once the subjective conditions for the experience of lack of self-respect are satisfied;
- The logical result of these new politics is that struggles cannot be waged for others. Political struggles must be grounded in one's own identity, where identity is a set of hard properties – fixed, known and stable. If identity stems from groups uniquely defined and different from others, this logically entails that my identity divides me from others: others cannot fight in my name, nor can I do it for them. This is because we can neither understand nor represent the particular experiences and positions of each other. Identity is precisely what makes someone a member of a unique tradition, memory and social location.

The upshot is that a universalist policy of liberation is at best ineffective and at worst a sham. For proponents of identity politics, **universalism contains and hides its own identity, covers the identity of the majority and imposes it on members of minority groups.**

These claims were quickly formalized and theorized by new disciplines such as women's studies, post-colonial studies, queer studies, and ethnicity studies, justifying the claim that political struggles of minorities were anchored in historical identities. Identity politics started off as a distinctly American phenomenon but quickly spread to the rest of the world, among other things through the institutional mimesis of academic organizations. The concept was uncommonly suited to the American polity, which conceived of civil society as a patchwork of communities, each defending their right to cultural autonomy. It stood in sharp contrast to other democratic polities, which had premised citizenship on a model of universal human rights, as was the case in French Republicanism.

Identity politics in Israel never connected to a broad universalist agenda

It is easy to understand why the late Arthur Schlesinger issued stern warnings against the politics of identity, seeing in them danger of fragmentation and disunity. Groups can find infinitesimal ways to gather around common histories and memories, some real and some invented, thus breaking away from other groups also struggling to have their rights recognized. This makes it difficult to rally around broad common causes. Given the ways in which women had been treated as subalterns in socialist movements and the fact that few or no heterosexuals, at least initially, defended and fought for the case of homosexuals, Schlesinger had overstated his point. Some groups needed to particularize in order to affirm their universal rights. Yet his bleak prognosis would have proven poignant in the Israeli context, where identity politics attained a different meaning: because universalism has never been entrenched in Israel's main institutions, identity politics only reproduced the particularism and exclusions enshrined in the Israeli conception of citizenship. Identity politics in Israel never connected to a broad universalist agenda, as was the case for women's, gay or African-American struggles in the United States. To better understand the influence of identity politics on Israeli society, we need to take a look at the Israeli model of citizenship.

Identity Politics in Israel

The Israeli model of citizenship started off as quasi-republican: public virtue, frugality and commitment to democratic principles were guiding forces of this model in Israel of the 1950s. It excluded the Arabs that

remained within the borders of the newly established state, but for Jews presented itself as a meeting point, an action plan for forging new Israeli citizens.

The majority of the “Yishuv” – the people who fought for the creation of the Jewish state – were secular Ashkenazis (i.e. of European descent). Their secularity was the result of a process of European modernization that had started before Jewish nationalism per se. Zionism represented a great historical compromise between cultural and religious assimilation in Europe, on the one hand, and the desire to renew Jewish identity, on the other. All or most of Israel’s national emblems, the rhetoric of returning to Zion and the public calendar were heavily borrowed from religious symbolism (for example, in the flag, the two blue stripes represent a tallit or prayer shawl, and both sides of the split Red Sea that the Hebrews walked through as written in the Book of Exodus; the blue and white colors are derived from the Bible as well, where they are mentioned in several instances). Despite the secular character of the Zionist movement, Zionism not only borrowed heavily from religious images and symbols but made religion present in the establishment of the state itself.



Zionist leaders in Latrun, following the Agatha operation in 1946 – [Image Source](#)

Far from negating religious Judaism (as is sometimes claimed), Zionism made surprising concessions to it even before the creation of the state, thus offsetting the possibility of creating a secular and inclusive citizenship. In 1947, founding father and first prime minister David Ben Gurion wrote a famous letter to Agudat Israel, the organization that represented Ashkenazi orthodox Judaism, committing the state to four key points: Observing the Sabbath; Kashrut in the newly-founded military; rabbinical control of personal-status laws; and autonomy for the religious education system.

In practice, the incorporation of Jewish religion into state institutions went further and deeper than these already major concessions. More significantly and dramatically: the 1950 Law of Return grants automatic citizenship to anyone defined as a Jew: “Every Jew has the **right** to come to this country as an immigrant.” But when the question arose as to who was entitled to define Jewishness, the rabbis – and more precisely, orthodox rabbis – took charge of the complicated and unsettled matter (in 1958-59).

In doing so, **the Israeli state paved the way even more for the ethnic-nationalism that has come to characterize the Israeli polity.** While trying to create a new nation and people, Zionism displayed an astonishing lack of imagination in the boundaries it drew for this group, in deciding who is in and who is out – in short, in deciding on citizenship. To create a new Jewish Israeli collective, it needed both to exclude the natives of the land (local Arabs) and to find a binding common denominator for diverse Jews who came from various cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. The secular state turned to the body that had defined the out-group boundaries of Jewishness for the last thousand years or so: the rabbis.

The Israeli state paved the way even more for the ethnic-nationalism that has come to characterize the Israeli polity

Compare this with the ways in which the Abbe Sieyes, a committed Roman-Catholic priest, defined citizenship during the French Revolution: “I picture the law as being in the center of a huge globe; all citizens, without exception, stand equidistant from it on the surface and occupy equal positions there” (quoted in Brubaker, *French Politics and Society*, p. 35). Anything that smacked of privilege (including the Church) would be non-civic according to this new conception of citizenship. Sieyes wanted to erase the old ways of belonging to French society, the society of three estates. He imagined an entirely different citizenship in which all citizens regardless of class, religion or ethnicity would stand equidistant from the law. Sieyes’s model of citizenship marked a radical rupture with the past, as it was equal and inclusive. The Zionist founding fathers of Israel, on the other hand, were far more ambivalent toward the past: they were eager to forget the immediate past of the Diaspora, but revived the ancient past of biblical sovereignty in order to find a common culture. **The connection to the distant biblical past was motivated, to be sure, by the need to forge a national consciousness, but it ultimately prevented the formulation of a universalist conception of citizenship,** which would include not only Arabs but also, and tragically, other Jews – the latecomers to the state, the Mizrahim or Jews who originated in Arab countries.

In the same way the state was thickly Jewish, it was also thickly Ashkenazi

Thus, while the connection between nationalism and religion is not a necessary one (see the French case), in the Israeli case, this connection shaped and dictated, through a combination of political strategies, a habitual and unconscious deference to religion and, through the attempt to create a culture rooted in the Bible, a thick national identity: **only through ethnic identity would citizens stand equidistant to the law. This created a quasi-equivalence between Jewishness and Israeliness** and left little space between the two (contrary to classical/secular models of liberal citizenship). As there was little or no universalist and secular basis for citizenship, it gave one ethnic group – Ashkenazis – supremacy over all other groups – Arabs and Jews that migrated to Israel from Arab countries (Mizrahim).

Because the Israeli state was not secular (its governing elites were, but not its institutions), it was not universalist. Secularism is not often discussed in terms of universalism, but the former is a quasi-condition for the latter as non-secular states tend to have a thick identity that excludes those who do not belong to the primary ethnic group. In the same way the state was thickly Jewish, it was also thickly Ashkenazi – in the control over most or all centers of power.

The Exclusion of Mizrahim

In the 1950s, Jews of Middle Eastern and North African origins flocked to Israel from Arab countries and were immediately excluded from significant areas of social power. Yemenite, Moroccan and Iraqi Jews who joined the state were not housed in urban centers – and were thus deprived of the wealth and access to

culture which these centers provided. Located in peripheral areas to which the socialist/Ashkenazi state allocated little or no cultural and educational resources, they became a severely discriminated group. Having been classified by the Ashkenazi Zionists who received them as “Mizrahim” (Easterners), they were bestowed an identity that was radically different from that of the Western and Eastern European Jews.

Because secular Ashkenazim denied Mizrahim the possibility of a secular identity, the only way to gain traction in the public sphere was as a religious movement

The history of these Mizrahim, who later turned fundamentalists in founding the ultra-orthodox party Shas, is curiously similar to that of the workers who were brought to European countries to help build or rebuild infrastructures such as the Maghreban workforce in France, colonial populations in England or the Turks in Germany. Like their European counterparts, Ashkenazi Zionists allocated working-class jobs to Mizrahim and classified them as a single entity radically foreign to their own aspiring identity, Western and secular. Theirs was an inferior and primitive intelligence, culturally backward and pre-modern, and most of all, religious – and therefore doubly foreign to the would-be progressive secular state.

Yet there is an irony here: the religiosity of Jews who came from Arab countries was in fact far more modern and modernizing than that of their Ashkenazi counterparts, the ultra-orthodox “Agudat Israel” with which the Zionist establishment had made such far-reaching compromises. What the Zionists took to be the religiosity of Mizrahim was simply the effect of their Orientalization by the Western-aspiring state of Israel (Shenhav, *Haaretz*, 27.12.1996 Kazzom, Shochat). While Agudat Israel (the organization with which Ben Gurion too easily compromised) was by all standards religiously extremist, anti-modern, ultra-orthodox – the religiosity of Jews born in Arab countries was far more accommodating of Western values, but because it was associated with the Arab world and the Orient, it was a source of cultural disgust.

Religion became a negative marker of ethnic identity and lower social class. That is why – as Amnon Raz-Krazotkin states – Mizrahim could enter politics only as an ultra-orthodox religious party. Because the state was based on the inferiority of Arabs, Arab Jews were associated with that inferiority. **Because secular Ashkenazim denied Mizrahim the possibility of a secular identity, the only way to gain traction in the public sphere was as a religious movement.** Unbeknownst to them, Ashkenazis had paved the way for a social and cultural gap that would later morph into a political gap that is yet to be bridged.



What later became Mizrahi fundamentalism did not precede the arrival of Mizrachim in Israel, but **was the creation of their classification by the Ashkenazi establishment, of their deep and wide discrimination from Israeli society**, and of their mimicry of Ashkenazi religious groups, which gained traction and power in the political arena. Their adoption of fundamentalism was the direct outcome of their Orientalization and social exclusion, and in effect made them claim power not in the name of universalist values, but in the name of a specialized identity niche within the broader identity niche of Ashkenazi Israelis.

This ethnic reading of the relationship of the Israeli state with religion suggests a double particularity of the Israeli state: Jewish (thus excluding its 20% Arabs) and Ashkenazi (thus excluding its 50% Mizrahim). This is because the state was neither universalist nor secular.

The Israeli Peace Camp as an Ethnic Camp

The Israeli left never fought for a universal conception of citizenship (even if Ben-Gurion extended citizenship to Arabs) because it was shaped rather by leftist ideas inspired by Russian socialism in its organization of production than by leftist ideas in the spirit of liberalism, which bestowed rights and freedoms. Yet the Israeli left curiously adopted a peace agenda that gave the appearance of universalism but de facto did not utilize the terminology and moral discourse of universalism for all populations inside Israel.

The “peace camp” became marked as the camp of a specific ethnic, educational and social group

The “Peace Now” movement was founded in 1978 after 348 army officers and reserve officers sent an anguished letter to Menachem Begin, urging him to renounce the settlement enterprise. The signatories were overwhelmingly and almost exclusively males of Ashkenazi descent. In fact, until recently, no Mizrahi ever participated in the leadership of Peace Now. The movement was strikingly marked by its ethnicity as Ashkenazim had been the natural holders of power and seemed to be its obvious representatives. Peace became the cultural marker and coat of arms of a specific social group, Ashkenazim, who – curiously enough – never considered that recruiting Mizrahim to their cause was important for both moral and political reasons. Israel must be one of the few countries in the world in which the ideal of peace functioned as a status symbol and social marker, as a mark of distinction. Because peace and human rights have been, historically, promoted by a social group that has retained its class, cultural and ethnic privileges, the “peace camp” became marked as the camp of a specific ethnic, educational and social group.

This is aptly illustrated by an article published by sociologist Yehouda Shenhav in *Haaretz* in the mid-1990s, in which he claimed that while the Israeli left fought for Arabs and for peace, it gazed with disgust upon Mizrahim. As sociologists would claim, a practice – whether cultural or political – that excludes others and is the apanage of a socially dominant group cannot effectively recruit the same social groups it excludes, both symbolically and culturally.

Mizrahim had been entirely excluded from the political establishment founded by Ashkenazim

While the left's identity politics were hidden from view and remained implicit under a veneer of superficial liberalism, Menachem Begin and the rightwing (but still liberal) Likud began shifting Israeli politics into the strident gears of identity politics. In a famous speech in 1981, Begin proclaimed the Mizrahim, who had been excluded from Israeli politics, were "brothers" because they were Jews. Mizrahim had been entirely excluded from the political establishment founded by Ashkenazim and could now re-enter it as Jews.

For Mizrahim, left-wing socialism would have been the wrong Trojan horse with which to enter Israeli society, as it was left-wing socialism that had exploited them in factories and fields and confined them in settlements isolated from urban centers. Galvanized by Begin's acknowledgement of their presence and importance, Mizrahim entered politics as Jews, in fact as an ultra-orthodox party. They exacted power and equality not from within the liberal tradition but from the game of political coalitions that Israeli democracy enabled.

The Shas Party

Shas is a Hebrew acronym for the Sephardic "Guardians of the Torah". The party was founded in 1984 and like other ultra-orthodox parties was headed by a rabbi. Its ideology was of a strain of Judaism that most Jews of Arab countries did not know. Shas had a social vocation and provided services and resources to its constituency (for example, a government-funded education system). It never stood or aimed to stand for larger universal values. It was from the outset a blatantly sectorial party, which functioned more like a lobby than as a party with a political platform based on values of social justice. Despite the wide discrimination against Mizrahim, they never invoked a universalist language of justice, but rather operated as an interest group redistributing resources to itself through various positions in government.

From the outset, Shas was a sectorial party that functioned more like a lobby than as a party with a political platform based on values of social justice

At first, Shas followed a moderate policy on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, after its leader Rabbi Yosef declared that lives were more important than land. But as the party held that Jewish life was, after all, superior to non-Jewish life, it quickly moved to the right, adopting a reactionary political agenda that opposed gay and women's rights.

The late Uri Avnery, a veteran left-wing activist, [expressed](#) his own disappointment:

"I had great hopes of the second or third generation of Mizrahim remembering that its forebears were an integral part of the Islamic Golden Age, that they would act as a bridge between the new Hebrew nation and its Palestinian neighbors and the entire Muslim world. It seemed natural to me for Mizrahim to recall their glorious heritage, the time when Jews in Iraq, Spain, Egypt and other Muslim countries were full partners in a flourishing civilization – while most Europeans were still savages.

Educated Jews – philosophers, mathematicians, poets and physicians – were partners in that civilization, alongside their Muslim counterparts. When European Jews were subject to daily persecution, forced to live in ghettos, expelled from country after country while facing the terrible Inquisition, Jews (and Christians) in Muslim countries enjoyed full rights."

In a somewhat patronizing way, Avnery expressed his frustration at the fact that Mizrahim did not view themselves as entrusted with the mission to function as a bridge between Arabs and Jews, and to renew the marvelous fusion of civilizations of the medieval Spanish Golden Age. But he was right: Mizrahim never tapped into universalism and acted instead as an interest group, because they reflected the identity politics of the Ashkenazim who had never been truly bothered by their massive exclusion of such large group of people and even felt entitled to it.

Other minority groups followed suit, most notably gays and women. Israel enjoys a relatively gay-friendly environment and has passed a series of laws that make it significantly more progressive than its neighbors. There are several gay advocacy organizations and the community can mobilize the media successfully when their rights are jeopardized (as was the case with the 2018 law prohibiting state-funded support for technologically-assisted childbirth). Yet it is quite interesting to note that while gay people constitute a natural left-wing constituency, there has never been a declared alliance with the peace movement in the country. Nor did the community create organizations that officially represent Arab and Jewish gays under a single umbrella.

Ofri Ilani aptly summarized this in a 2018 article in *Ha'aretz*:

“[T]he LGBT agenda is no longer identified with the old and despised form of left-wing politics. LGBT people aren’t old elites and aren’t regressing. On the contrary, theirs is an up-to-date identity with young and dynamic brand values. It’s attractive mainly among the young generation, whose support for the left is nonexistent. It’s an aesthetic politics that requires no concessions. The demand to end the occupation, or demands put forward by feminists and socialists, call for significant concessions by the possessors of power and resources. The LGBT demand for equality requires nothing in return.” >>

The Israeli LGBT movement acts more like an interest group than to promote a universalist rhetoric of rights for all disenfranchised groups

Indeed, LGBT politics are a lifestyle politics centered around protesting and boycotting anything that smacks of homophobia. In that sense, the LGBT movement acts more like an interest group than to promote a universalist rhetoric of rights for all disenfranchised groups. The same holds true for the Israeli Women’s Network, which is the main institution promoting equality for women. Over the years, the network’s board has been careful not to voice opinions on divisive political matters such as the Jewish settlements in the West Bank and has acted only to defend the cause of women.

Conclusion

Thus, the term “identity politics” hides vastly different political situations. In the US, identity politics resonated with the cultural patchwork envisioned by the American polity, which was always united around key values such as the constitution and belief in the American dream (access to social mobility). It was this peculiar mix of belief in the Constitution and in one’s own community that formed the uniqueness and power of US identity politics.

In Israel, there never were “constitutional” universalist values to serve as the basis for further democratizing the social bond. In other words, identity politics in Israel differ significantly from those of minority groups in the US, which occasionally formed coalitions and alliances between themselves and appealed to the universalist rhetoric.

Martin Luther King opened his famous “I Have a Dream” speech with a direct invocation of the white

founders of the Constitution: *“Five score years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today, signed the Emancipation Proclamation. This momentous decree came as a great beacon light of hope to millions of Negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice. It came as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of captivity.”* Martin Luther King was referring to Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address, which itself referred to the constitution: *“Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.”*

Israel is still waiting for its Martin Luther King, but even if it found one, he or she would not know how to voice their call for justice, which is by definition always universalist.

[\[1\]](#) (Zillah R. Eisenstein (1978), The Combahee River Collective Statement)