

What is Secular Judaism?

• BY ERAN BARUCH

The term “Secular Judaism” has always been a troublesome combination – one that has only become increasingly problematic over the past several generations.

In the two largest Jewish communities in the world – Israel and the US – secular Judaism is often understood as a negative concept, one that expresses emptiness, assimilation, superficiality and lack of Jewish education or commitment to the Jewish people. The reasons for this are many and the expressions of this attitude are too numerous to list here.

In Israel, I will mention only the decline of the socialist Zionist narrative of the state as opposed to the rise of the national-religious right. In the American Jewish community, assimilation and intermarriage, often attributed to lack of religious affiliation, have created antagonism and aversion to the concept of secular Judaism.

This animosity towards the secular Jew persists despite the fact that the vast majority of Israeli Jews define themselves as “*hiloni*” (secular), and many of the leaders and thought influencers of recent times among world Jewry identified as secular Jews and reflected a secular Jewish lifestyle.

From survey results of the recent Pew study, a clear picture emerges that the number of unaffiliated Jews is constantly on the rise. Still, because of political tensions in Israel and because of the unbalanced institutional structures of education systems in Israel and abroad, the secular approach to Judaism is seldom taught and rarely finds outlets for expression. In many cases it is muted, excluded and perceived as illegitimate. Sometimes – as eloquently stated by Yizhar Smilansky in his 1981 formative essay – it takes “courage” to be a secular Jew.

Many of those engaged in Jewish education prefer to use softened terms, which blur the identities of secular Jews: pluralistic Judaism, Jewish culture,



Jewish renewal, Israeli Judaism, post-denominational Judaism.

We, at BINA: The Jewish Movement for Social Change (*bina* means “wisdom” in Hebrew) have chosen not to mask it, to disguise it or to cover it up, but rather to seek to use the term authentically. We are engaged, committed and learned secular Jews. We will undoubtedly pay a price for our unabashed use of this controversial terminology, but if our efforts to cultivate Jewish communities and build a strong Jewish democracy in Israel are genuine and profound, we have no other way.

We are attempting to apply the tried-and-true traditional Jewish methodology of exegesis to the term “secular.” In the spirit of the great work of Hayim Nahman Bialik, “Language Closure and Disclosure” (1915), we have set out to charge the term “secular Jew” with new connotations, content and depth that will allow the words themselves to shine in a new light.

I offer here several interpretations for the concept of secularism/secularization in Hebrew, which could illuminate its etymology in a new light.

Ari Elon, Talmud scholar, traveling preacher and one of the precursors to the wave of secular Jewish renewal in Israel, reads the Hebrew word “*hiloni*” as “*halon*,” window. This midrash opens “windows” in the traditional old house-of-study, which was typically the province of elite scholarly males, and allows

for new, creative and inclusive interpretations, as it says in the Babylonian Talmud: “It is impossible for a Beit Midrash to exist without *hiddush* (innovation).”

Apart from the picturesque image of expanding our view into and out-of the Beit Midrash by making learning creative and innovative, Elon’s “windows” interpretation also suggests the use of computers and the Internet as tools for teaching and learning in Jewish educational centers of the third millennium.

Dov Elboim, author, teacher and media personality, interprets the concept of *hiloni* in relation to the term “*halal*” – space or void. A midrash on the verse “I will lift up mine eyes unto the mountains: from whence shall my help come?” (Psalms 121), enables us to define the place from which solace shall emerge as the “*halal hapanui*” or the depths of the mystical void, the non-place where the world was created according to Kabbalistic theory. That is where creation and creativity occur. That is where the dynamic forces of life and renewal are revealed; The inner point in the work of God.

Another suggestion for interpretation of the word *hiloni* relies on exchange of the two letters m and n, in the center of the Hebrew alphabet, to form the word “*halomi*,” dreamy. Secularism is a dream-like idea. The dream is a fundamental element in many biblical stories, such as Jacob’s dream and the dreams of Joseph. The dream is the workshop of the unconscious mind, the creative workshop of the spirit. The dream has also been linked to vision, prophecy and national purpose. It is the process of linking between past and future; between the threshold of cognition to self-awareness, between sleeping and waking; between the twilight fantasy and the transition to a call to action.

Let us all be proud and happy with our Jewish existence. We should open the windows, make space for the empty void – and dream. ❖

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