

# The Mediterranean Israeli Identity

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Currently, there are several reasons why Israel must remember that, from the geographical and historical point of view, it is an integral part of the Mediterranean. The continuous hostility of most Mediterranean countries towards Israel, its immense dependence on the United States and the growing technological modernisation worldwide have made the current Israeli identity typically western; its citizens do not look to the countries of the Mediterranean basin but to Western Europe and North America as models of inspiration and examples to follow. Israelis should remember their history and bear in mind that the Mediterranean identity is a splendid one. The great civilisations emerged and developed in the Mediterranean basin. Jews, who were active guests and involved in both the Islamic world and the Christian world, must now also contribute decisively to the Mediterranean identity that includes their historical Jewish identity.

In the year 70 AD, with the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem by the Roman Empire and the suppression of the little autonomy then enjoyed by Jews in the Land of Israel, the Jewish people had between four and five million souls. This was a highly respectable number in an ancient world estimated to have had around seventy million people.

But not all Jews then lived in the Land of Israel. From the 5th century BC, they started dispersing all over the Mediterranean basin and some areas in the North. Around half the Jewish people had voluntarily spread to various territories inhabited by different peoples. Beginning with the exile to Babylonia – today Iraq –, the dispersion of the Jews continued towards Asia Minor, the Greek Islands, Egypt, Libya and other places in North Africa. Jews also lived in Rome, Greece and the Iberian Peninsula. Throughout the Roman Empire, and even beyond, Jews settled in countries that were not

their own, despite maintaining their complex and genuine identity, a special problematic combination of religion and nationality.

It was, however, with the destruction of the Second Temple and the loss of the last vestiges of independence when the number of Jews began to decline because, owing to the hardening of religious demands, they had to seek other more nomadic professions, related above all to the literacy required by prayer and study. And this was how, with the expulsion of the Jews in 1497 from Sepharad, the number of Jews in the world drastically descended to under one million, most of them living in the Muslim world or in the Mediterranean basin countries such as Italy, Spain, Greece and the South of France. At the end of the first millennium, around ninety percent of Jews lived in the Islamic world and only ten percent in the Christian world.

To summarise this brief introduction, we can say that for over two thousand years (if

we consider that the beginnings of the Jewish people or the people of Israel took place around the year 1000 BC; that is, during the most important period in the history of the Jewish people), they were characterised as mainly Mediterranean.

A significant change occurred with the start of the early modern period, when Christian Europe began to consolidate and develop while the Muslim world found itself embroiled in a kind of cultural torpor and technological paralysis. Therefore, thanks to this awakening of modern, scientific, economic and social civilisation in Europe, most Jews managed, as they were not linked to the land, to find a suitable place among European peoples and, especially, among those from Eastern Europe. This also resulted in a significant rise in their number, so that on the eve of the Second World War the demographic balance had tipped in the opposite direction. Thus, ninety percent of Jews, then around eighteen million souls, lived in the Christian world and only ten percent inhabited the Muslim world.

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The Jewish Holocaust in Europe exterminated one third of the Jewish people in the cruellest and most demented genocide humanity has ever known. This extermination was not perpetrated for territorial, religious, economic or ideological reasons, but was a frenzied hatred of the Jewish race, even though Jews had never been defined as a race. Luckily for the people, some shrewd, far-sighted Jews with a great sense of morality, most of them openly secular, were able to identify the terrible tragedy that awaited them fifty years before the Holocaust, and thus, on the initiative of a few, in the early

20th century they left the Europe that, over time, had become a death trap for them. Thus, they decided to return to their place of origin, to the Middle East, to reclaim sovereignty and freedom in the Land of Israel, the patria of their ancient ancestors. Thanks to them, after the cruel genocide committed against the Jewish people, the world was not left with just a few museums recalling the murdered millions, but also a sovereign and independent country where six and a half million free Jews currently live.

However, the separation from Europe was not complete. The identity of most Jews who arrived in the Land of Israel before the Holocaust, as well as that of those who founded and built the State of Israel in 1948, was strongly linked to European and American civilisation, and still is. Moreover, before the Holocaust many European Jews wisely fled to America (before its doors were finally closed in the late 1920s), and also adopted European values and considered themselves as decidedly western.

We must add to this that the return of the Jews to their ancient patria led to the instability of the Jewish communities that had lived until then in relative peace and tranquillity in the Muslim world. Therefore, with the creation of the State of Israel in part of Palestine and the consequent war immediately waged against it by seven Arab countries with the aim of making it disappear, most Jews decided or felt obliged to leave the Arab countries of Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Lebanon; and the same happened to many Jews who lived in North Africa. These eastern and Mediterranean Jews therefore began forming part of western Israeli identity, although not always successfully.

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Tel Aviv seaside (IEMed Collection).

to the countries of the Mediterranean basin but to Western Europe and North America as models of inspiration and examples to follow.

Nevertheless, we must not forget that Israel is, from the geographical and historical point of view, an integral part of the Mediterranean. Therefore, if it wants to ensure itself a lasting existence in the area that was the base and origin of the formation and growth of the people of Israel, it must find a path of renewal by deepening its Mediterranean identity and integrating Mediterranean cultural, spiritual, economic and historical elements into its current western identity. Moreover, the country must foster creative channels that make a new contribution to the Mediterranean identity of

its neighbours. There are at least four reasons for this:

The first is related to the transformation of an essential part of the Zionism of a mythical Jewish identity into a historical Israeli identity, in the well known words of the great scholar of Jewish philosophy, Professor Gershom Scholem. He argues that, during two thousand years of exile, the Jewish identity was based on texts and myths that, in most cases, went beyond time and a specific physical location. Jews moved from place to place just as someone changes hotel. They generally regarded the many countries they wandered through, whether from choice or as a consequence of expulsion, as mere temporary places to live

until, with the help of God's power, they could be redeemed by returning to their historical patria, which in the meantime, although no one knows exactly why, they avoided on their many wanderings.

For the most part they took no interest in the history of the peoples among whom they lived, but confined themselves to the aspects concerning their rights and obligations as a temporary minority. The "patria" component of the Jewish identity was always weak so that it did not compete with the powerful and demanding religion of their God, which clung to their nationalism. Therefore, a new perspective on history in their ancient patria, with full responsibility in all spheres of life, obliges Israelis to make a substantial change by identifying themselves with their geographical neighbours. They should learn to know their limits and their history, to explore the characteristics of Mediterranean identity as a whole more fully. If Israel continues developing its identity by maintaining an exclusive dialogue with the distant United States or Western Europe, it will not be capable of implementing, as it should, its complete return to history, while running the risk of sinking once again into the old myths that will take it back to the abyss.

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This leads to the second reason that would nourish their Mediterranean identity and consists of reconciling with the Arab world, which has always refused or at least had been reluctant to recognise the existence of the State of Israel. Arabs, be they Palestinian or from other countries bordering Israel, believe that Jews are actually real foreigners in the Mediterranean area and that only anti-Semitism pushed them

into finding a place in the Middle East. Therefore, the acceptance of Mediterranean identity and its cultivation is what will demonstrate to Arabs that Jews, for most of their history, were actually settlers of the Mediterranean area. They created great works there: the Bible, the Mishnah, the Talmud and the Cabala came from the Land of Israel and not Europe. By this I mean that the Mediterranean identity is the desirable identity for the State of Israel, which must be neither western nor eastern, but Mediterranean, a legitimate and consolidated member of the area which is in fact the cradle of world culture.

The third reason that leads to the fostering of the Israeli Mediterranean identity is related to the demographic component of the Israelis themselves. Although just before the start of the Second World War ninety percent of Jews lived in Christian countries and only ten percent in Muslim countries, the truth is that owing to the extermination of most Jews in Europe, and also to the emigration of many European Jews from the late 19th century and during the 20th century to America, today in Israel the presence of these two Jewish communities accounts for fifty percent. In other words, half of the Jews of Israel come from Europe and the other half from Arab countries. If we add the one and a half million Palestinian Israelis, we find that the population of Israel today is clearly of Mediterranean origin. Therefore, despite the outward western identity of the current State of Israel, among the population of eastern origin, which as they come from weaker countries are also more weakly represented in Israeli life itself, there is a longing, a will and a need to express their Mediterranean nature in the cultural, religious and historical manifestations of Israel. Consequently, the fact of intentionally promoting the Mediterranean facet of Israeli identity could help create greater balance, more conciliation and agreement between its

eastern and Palestinian components and its western European components.

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The last reason is generally related to the process of globalisation experienced by much of the world and that, through technology, the free economy and efficient and speedy communications, is creating a kind of unified and superficial identity. Perhaps this is why a voracious and renewed desire has been awakened to recover specific national identities. We have seen this in the breakup of Yugoslavia into different nation states; we have seen it in Czechoslovakia, and also among the Basques and Catalans in Spain, the Scots in the United Kingdom and in many other places. This process is not always advisable from an economic point of view and can even

cause new and unnecessary conflicts. Therefore, the organisations in a geographical area with a common historical-cultural base could be a suitable response to the rampant global identity of the modern world, although this should not generate overly local identities that can awaken undesirable conflicts.

The Mediterranean identity is a splendid identity, ancient and modern. The great civilisations were born and developed in the Mediterranean basin: Christianity, Judaism, Islam, as well as Greco-Roman culture. All these sources are still alive today and are, in many senses, of great importance to the world. Jews, who were active guests and involved in both the Islamic world and the Christian world, must now also contribute decisively to the Mediterranean identity that includes their historical Jewish identity. It is therefore a historical duty of Israelis towards the Mediterranean basin, in which they wish to remain as permanent residents after having overcome such harsh and exhausting migrations, to make it part of their identity.