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Cover to Cover / Yehouda Shenhav

Fragments of a mosaic, or a fragmented mosaic?

The ruling elite of this country is raising the alarm about multiculturalism in the name of 'the general good'

*"The Beracha Report on Culture Policy in Israel," Elihu Katz with Hed Sela, The Jerusalem Van Leer Institute, 75 pages, no price listed.
 "A Position Paper on Cultural Policy in Israel in the 21st Century," Zohar Shavit et al., The Ministry of Science, Culture and Sport, 197 pages, no price listed*

Ostensibly, a cultural renaissance. Not every year is a society blessed with two fat reports that aim at dealing with the state of culture. This sounds more like the French or the English than like the Israelis. The simultaneity of their appearance and their similar pretensions to formulate an agenda for a comprehensive cultural policy invite a close reading of the many pages before us. Equally, they present a series of questions about the context in which the reports have been published, about the kinds of audiences to which they are addressed, the strategies by which they were produced and the hyper-narratives from which they derive their explicit and implicit levels.

"Israeli" culture was imagined and engineered from its inception as an ethno-national culture, not as a civil culture. Its traditional agents are the state and what is customarily called the "old elites." This culture was organized primarily around the three central issues of nationalism: identity (Jewish, Zionist, masculine), territory (the land of the homeland, the holy land) and language (Hebrew), out of an aspiration toward cultural homogenization and the constant blurring of the boundaries between nation and nationality, state and society, people and land, and the Jewish and the Israeli. Literature, film, theater, dance, music and poetry were shaped - from above or below - by institutionalized mechanism, that dictated codes, genres and clear cultural hierarchies.

Recently it looks as though several centrifugal forces have joined together to threaten the status of the national cultural hegemony; the option of liberation from the strong embrace of nationalism is perceived as fangible. At the same time, there

tween nationalism and trans-nationalism (Roger Brubaker).

Despite the striking differences among these models, the concept "multiculturalism" - particularly in public debate in Israel - has become the trash can into which are indiscriminately tossed terms and ideas that are very different from one another.

The appearance of these three centrifugal forces have lit a red light in recent years among certain sectors in Israel that are anxious about the status of the national culture and their own standing as social and cultural elites. This anxiety has succeeded in uniting elements of different political stripes, from the nationalist right that clings to ideas of "cultural hygiene" and from the (old) left that is beginning to feel the loss of its cul-

ture with the culture that was, not the situation to come.

A rich report

The first of these reports, which was funded by the Beracha Foundation, was written by Elihu Katz with Hed Sela and published by the Jerusalem Van Leer Institute. It is based on two large surveys, interviews and discussions with groups of "population sectors" and 11 position papers by experts. The Beracha report is a rich report. It deals with the structure of the support for the arts, the relationship between the official cultural bodies and artists, patterns of cultural supply and demand, criteria for public support, and dilemmas concerning the relationship be-

us that "To our surprise we heard mainly multicultural rhetoric that was softer and more optimistic than we had expected" (Panim, p. 10). The main conclusion of the report is that multiculturalism is not a real phenomenon, and that the majority of the public is interested in the consumption of Western high culture. This conclusion leads to the recommendation that state support for these cultural activities be continued.

Were an observer from outer space to arrive here and read the Beracha report he would learn of quite a homogeneous society, which consumes high culture that even marginal groups recognize and with which they want to align themselves. How would this observer reconcile the sterility that emerges from this report with the reported reality of rifts

"What would you like the cultural life of most Israelis to resemble?" Every respondent was asked to choose among three options: the countries of Western Europe, the Mediterranean countries and the countries of the Muslim world. The result is ostensibly unambiguous. On average only 10 percent of the Jewish respondents preferred Middle Eastern culture. Furthermore, only 15 to 17 percent of the Mizrahim preferred this. The authors of the report use these results to justify a preference for "Western culture" by the Mizrahim as well.

However, a look at the small print on the questionnaire reveals two disturbing survey strategies. The one, that the respondents were given a choice between Middle Eastern culture and Western culture as a dichotomous choice (there was

with an apocalyptic vision: "Society is facing a real danger of crumbling. Bursting multiculturalism will undermine the dream of reviving the impetus toward a reborn Jewish/Israeli culture. Controlled multiculturalism might be helpful in this, but it is a dangerous game." Or: "Is this good? Certainly not for a revolutionary society that aims at marching in a certain direction - together."

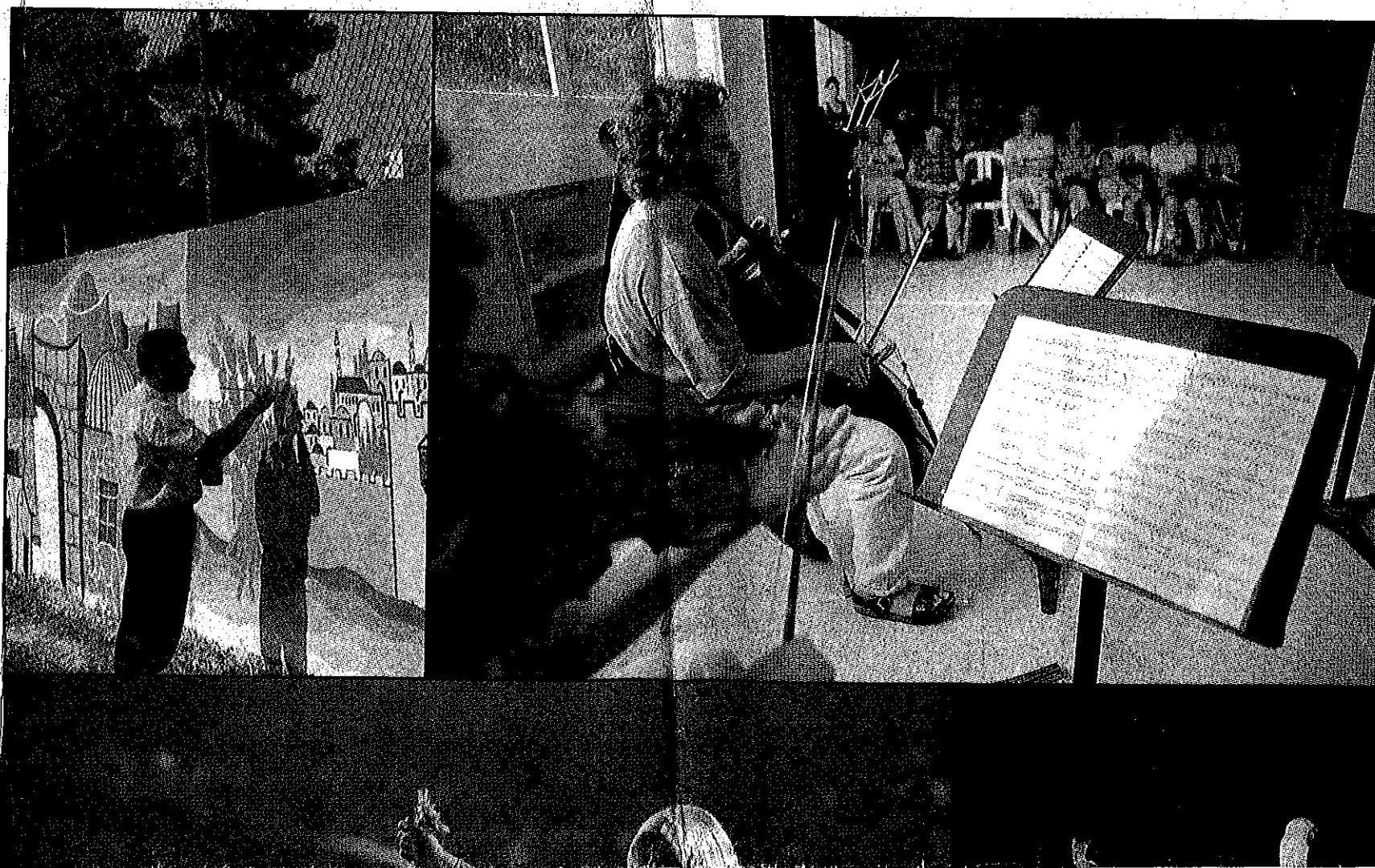
The core of the matter

The second report on cultural policy was written by a committee appointed by Science, Culture and Sport Minister Matan Vilnai, consisting of nine members: Zohar Shavit (chair), Meir Aharonson, Kobi Oz, Anna Isakova, Moshe Lisak, Adal Mana'a, Hed Sela, Amos Kenan and Yair Sheleg. Even though this hasty and careless report spreads over almost 200 pages, only 26 pages of it were formulated by the members of the committee. Most of the thick volume of the report is comprised of appendices consisting of 47 position papers presented "on the responsibility of the writers and in their own names."

In this report may be found all the clichés and mantras that should be found in a report dealing with culture, but there is hardly a single significant statement, apart from two recommendations that are unlikely to be taken seriously. The one, a recommendation to allocate 1 percent of the national budget to the support and distribution of culture (as opposed to 0.15 percent today). The second is to make a place for Arab cultural autonomy and the elimination of the long-lived discrimination against the language and culture of the Arab national minority. The committee says nothing about the way in which this should be done, or about the internal contradictions it will create concerning the Jewish national symbols.

The committee pays lip service to the rhetoric of multiculturalism and says that "there is room for all groups that wish to give cultural expression to their world of emotions, values and history." However, the committee immediately hedges this conclusion and subsumes this multiplicity to the existence of a common center: "The recognition of the legitimacy of differences and variety does not afford legitimacy to a divisive and schismatic cultural reality." In other words, the existence of a multicultural society is possible as long as it is controlled and ruled by "a common cultural core."

In order to preserve this center, the



centrifugal forces may be divided, artificially, into three categories: the multiplicity of cultures; globalization and the market economy; academic discourse on multiculturalism.

The multiplicity of cultures derives from several sources: the national aspirations of the Palestinian citizens of Israel, and in particular the demand by some of their leaders for cultural autonomy; the reaction to the ideology of the melting pot (the most outstanding indicator of which is the appearance of Shas); the development of a women's culture (for example, literature) that is not subsumed to the national genre; hundreds of thousands of foreign workers - from Africa, South America and Eastern Europe - who are developing ethnic cultures of their own in Israel; the huge waves of immigration from Ethiopia and the Soviet Union, including the fact that one-third of the immigrants from the Soviet Union are not Jews. All these are creating a fascinating cultural mosaic that is threatening the centrality of the national culture and its key figures.

The second category is globalization and the danger inherent in it of an undermining of the state as a homogenous vessel of cultural and political control. The process of globalization is accompanied by a strengthening of a neo-liberal ideology, processes of privatization and big capital and market forces, whose influence on the canonic cultural institutions has reached alarming dimensions as a result of the establishment of commercial television and the privatization of communications channels. "The open skies" have, at the end of the day, brought about a decline in the effectiveness of the national filters.

The third category brings together a number of theoretical models that have been brought here primarily by academics, among them: the liberal multicultural discourse that has developed around feminism, black cultures and other oppressed cultures from the United States (for example, Charles Taylor or Michael Walzer); the post-colonial theory that has emerged among the intellectuals of the Third World, which aims at creating new kinds of discourse while reorganizing the relations between East and West (e.g. Franz Fanon and Edward Said); the postmodern discourse, particularly French, which expresses ontological doubt and aims at formulating epistemological principles for the criticism of modern hierarchies (Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Jean Francois Lyotard); the civil discourse that has grown up around the migration of labor in Europe and which has formulated models of participation in political societies, and of the relationship be-



Cultural complex: Clockwise from top left, Festival of Palestinian culture; Days of Music at Kfar Blum; Karmiel Folk Dance Festival; and Mizrahi singer Sarit Hadad.

tural hegemony.

The term "multiculturalism" has become anathema to certain old left circles because it is perceived as sabotaging the efforts of the "class struggle" and the welfare state (for example, Ze'ev Sternhell); among the nationalist-Zionist left (for example, Meretz MK Amnon Rubinstein) or among the nationalist right (for example, the journal *Techelet*) because it is seen as threatening the status of Zionism; or among the "enlightened public" for the legitimacy the concept gives, ostensibly, to phenomena of cultural nihilism, religious fundamentalism or the Levantinization of Israeli culture (for example the Besh'a'ar organization of professors for a rational society). Concepts like "post-Zionism," "postmodernism," "nihilism," "fundamentalism," and "separatism" have turned into negative signifiers of the state of the new culture.

The authors of the reports before us could have had a shaping role in the description of the cultural complex we are facing, in clearing up the conceptual confusion that has been created and in proposing analytic and practical strategies for dealing with the new reality through the intelligent use of empirical findings (of which there are many) about similar phenomena elsewhere in the world.

However, the two reports have missed this opportunity. In the guise of dealing with the multicultural option and incidentally using a rhetoric that is ostensibly politically correct, both reports are speaking from the mouth of the state and the "old elites." Instead of a pretense of formulating a cultural policy "for the 21st century," as one of them promised, they have been written out of conceptual anachronism, deep fear and an engage-

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tween the center and the periphery.

However, despite its broad scope, the Beracha report is unable to deal with the challenge that is posed to us by the new cultural situation. The authors of the report have elected to bypass the cluster of pressing cultural questions and to limit themselves most peculiarly to the discussion of elitist culture: the stage arts (theater, dance and opera), museums and to a certain extent film as well (the report has appendices that appear in the journal *Panim 10*, 1999).

The elitist stance of the writers of this report is clearly expressed in the manner in which they deal with the question of multiculturalism. The report identifies four groups of "others" in Israeli society: Arabs, the ultra-Orthodox, Mizrahim (Jews originating in the Muslim countries) and immigrants from the former Soviet Union. From this list of "the groups of others" notably missing is the Ashkenazi, secular liberal sector. This absence assumes the existence of this group as the central hegemony that consumes high culture and wants to distribute the pound of flesh among the "others." This is a stance that replicates the old perception of center and periphery and speaks from the heights of the old cultural hierarchy.

From this perspective they report to

no possibility of choosing both at once). The possibility that a respondent might prefer both of these equally was not considered by those who conducted the survey. That is, the assumption by the writers of the survey on multiculturalism was of a zero-sum game. The moment you belong to one culture, you cannot belong to another. It is not surprising that by means of such a fundamentalist definition of multiculturalism they succeeded in letting the air out of the legitimacy of the idea as a whole.

The second survey strategy lies in the way in which the explanation of the question was formulated. The authors of the survey propose to the respondents the cultures of Egypt and Jordan as an example of what they mean by the definition of Middle Eastern culture.

It is worth asking to what extent the answer to this question represents the Israeli reality in the year 2000. What is the likelihood that Mizrahim who over the past 50 years have gone through an accelerated process of de-Arabization would indicate Arab culture as their preferred culture? The denial of the Arab past has become a central focus of the mental cartography of Israeli nationalism in general and that of the Mizrahim in particular. The absurdity in this question may be exemplified by the fact that Shas voters did not check Middle Eastern culture as their preferred choice because it was defined as Arab.

The writers of the report thus found what they wanted to find, and have created a circular reality that denies the phenomenon of multiculturalism: "Multiculturalism ... is not much more than an empty slogan, the vagueness of which might or is liable to serve people with an agenda." They go on to caution us about it

the state. The report talks of "the culture of a state" (it could, for example, have talked about the cultural life of a "society") and aggrandizes the power of the state (despite the differences of opinion that there were about this, apparently, within the committee) as a key player in the creation of the culture of the society: as a mediator, regulator and allocator of resources. The state, we learn, will strive "to strengthen the common cultural core and the recognition of a common center and a common system of values."

The report makes no mention at all of the culture of residents of this country who are not Israeli citizens (what we call "foreign workers") because dealing with them would have interfered with the civil rationale for a common core. The conception of Israeli identity is perceived as self-explanatory - not a conception of a general good" that is given to dialogue and negotiation, but as a core determined in advance, shaped and engineered from above, strengthened by the state, and which serves as a criterion for rewarding cultural groups in accordance with their closeness to the national model.

As in the Beracha report, here too the declaration about the core is a declaration of a clear and traditional cultural hierarchy, of the regulation at the level of the state and the elites of the differential allocation of resources. These positions were backed up by the chair of the committee, Prof. Zohar Shavit, on several occasions. In a discussion of the Beracha report at the Van Leer Institute (December 23, 1999), she declared that "multiculturalism is racism." In an interview to Channel Two News (March 1, 2000) during the debate over the inclusion of works by Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish in the Israeli high school curriculum, Shavit made clear her position on the common cultural core: "Before we see to it that Israeli children are familiar with Mahmoud Darwish and Sami Michael [an Israeli Jewish writer of Iraqi origin], with whom they should certainly be familiar, it would be best to see to it that they are familiar with the assets of Israeli culture from [poet Chaim Nachman] Bialik through [novelist S.Y.] Agnon to [contemporary poet] Yehuda Amichai."

Despite Shavit's apologetics about criticism by Michael Handelzalts (*Ha'aretz*, Sefarim, March 15), it is hard not to see the congruence between Shavit's positions and the conclusions of the committee, and the positions that appear in some of the appendices that spread over 175 pages.

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