

בין היטמעות לקליטה מוצלחת: כיצד משתלבים בחברה מבלי לוותר על הזהות

Assimilation as Disappearance or Assimilation as Integration: The Challenge of Living with Two Identities

Two weeks ago, Jews across the United States celebrated the holiday of Thanksgiving, and indeed, even many American olim to Israel celebrated the holiday (though perhaps on Friday evening). The holiday is a rare example of American Jews adopting a non-jewish holiday wholeheartedly. Thanksgiving can be seen as an example of non-threatening assimilation on the part of Jews into American society- the adoption of an American custom that does not require giving up Jewish tradition and customs. On the other hand, the upcoming Hanukkah holiday challenges us to understand we maintain a strong Jewish identity without being subsumed by Christmas and its similar emphasis on lights. This study looks at the question of how Jews have integrated into two societies-- American society and Israeli society--as well as what has been gained and what has been lost from that integration.

Opening Questions: In what ways has your assimilation into the larger culture, be it American or Israel, been a challenge for you? In what ways has it been a blessing? Do you feel like you have had to give up aspects of your identity in order to fit in to the larger culture? Are there areas in which you feel that your differences have been accepted?

Assimilation or Multi-Culturalism

היטמעות או רב תרבותיות

The following three texts, one from David Ben-Gurion, the second from Rabbi Mishael Zion, a young rabbi living in Israel, and the third from the Israeli author Eli Amir offer three visions of assimilation in the Jewish state. Think about which vision is more appealing as you read them.

Ben Gurion, lecture to military commanders, 1950

1. "This is the noble destiny of our era. The admixture of people which flows in from foreign exiles will be cleansed, refined and purified from harmful, foreign dross in the melting pot of Jewish brotherhood and through military discipline. The barriers between communities will be torn down and true unity of a new nation reviving its youth will be forged which will draw from an ancient past saturated with struggle and experience, built and glorified through pioneering work and a struggle for freedom, aided by a spirit of bravery, heroism and strength, and bound to a messianic vision whose time has come."

Questions:

According to this text, how does Ben Gurion imagine that the Israeli identity will be developed? What are the advantages of this vision? To what extent do you believe that it was fulfilled?

Rabbi Michael Zion, as appears in ynet's English edition

2. "So in this time of complex Israeli-Jewish identities, of framing ourselves as descendants of Moroccans and Kurdistanis, from the Soviet Union and from Holland, in which each of us contributes our own sweet and bitter elements to the crazy mixture that is Israeli Judaism, I'm proud to count myself among those descended from Americans, from that great liberal community. I hope to continue to uphold that Tree of Life that my ancestors planted in the soil of the United States, and here, in my home in Jerusalem, to continue walking in its ways; because its ways are ways of pleasantness, and all its paths are peace."

Questions:

How does this text describe the current reality of Israeli identity? What is gained and what is lost by having "complex Israeli-Jewish identities?" What are the ways in which "American Judaism" stands out on the Israeli landscape, for Zion? Do Israelis feel like they need to give up those American-Jewish values in order to be more Israeli? For the Israelis who aren't Americans, does this ring true? Is it possible to proudly maintain those traditions and be fully Israeli? For the Americans, have you experienced that Israel does not value those aspects of American Judaism?

Eli Amir, The Love Of Shaul

3. "There are among us people, said Shaike, who deceive themselves and talk about Israeli unity, and they hope that we won't understand, and perhaps they themselves don't understand, that amongst the Jewish people a true, positive Jewish unity exists and thrives that includes all of the differences found in our people, and this unity means equality for all of our differences in our democratic existence. But those pushing Israeli unity often are referring to a unity that requires all of us to be identical to one another, and indeed they don't mean Israeli unity but rather Israeli uniformity, to uniform ways of thinking, to the non-democratic idea that there should be no opposition, referring to a flock that follows the leader, to a sort of unity of dress, total unity leaving no room for differences, and they neither see nor want to see that the only sacred value is our pluralism... "

Questions

In your experience, when has assimilation involved forgoing your identity in order to fit in to the larger society? How do we build a society that thrives on diversity while still maintaining a common identity?

Conclusion: How Is Assimilation a Blessing

סיכום: כיצד הופכים את היטמעות לברכה

This final text, from a graduation speech by JTS Chancellor Gerson Cohen, suggests that Jewish assimilation allows for inspiration and growth in Judaism that makes us thrive.

Guiding Questions to think about while reading:

What are the values and inspirations that you have received from the non-Jewish cultures around you, be they in the United States or around the world? How is your Judaism and Jewish identity stronger because of its interactions with other societies?

Gerson Cohen, Chancellor of JTS, *The Blessing of Assimilation in Jewish History*

“Assimilation properly channeled and exploited *can* become a blessing. The great ages of Jewish creativity were born out of response to the challenge of assimilation, and there is no reason why our age should not respond to this challenge with equal vigor. Assimilation is not a one-way street: very much like the Torah itself, it is capable of paralyzing or of energizing, depending on how we react to it.”

** בחרנו לתרגם **Assimilation** כהיטמעות ולא התבוללות מכיוון שכיום המילה התבוללות מובנת על ידי ישראלים כנישואי תערובת ולא כהשתלבות בחברה הכללית.