

Scholar charts evolution of Israelis' views on war



In synagogue speech, Rutgers scholar tells of growing weariness



Yael Zerubavel, director of Rutgers' Allen and Joan Bildner Center for the Study of Jewish Life, spoke March 25 at the Highland Park Temple Congregation Anshe Emeth about the effect of war on Israeli culture. Photo by Debra Rubin

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An Israeli-born scholar sees an evolution in Israelis' reactions to living under constant threat, influenced by shifting attitudes toward war and new perceptions about the Holocaust.

A national ethos of self-sacrifice, said Yael Zerubavel, gave way at first to a sense of weariness and lately to a mood of fatalism.

As peace seems more distant, Israelis “want to enjoy materialism,” said Zerubavel, speaking March 25 at the Highland Park Conservative Temple Congregation Anshe Emeth. “They want to enjoy life. They want to live in the present because they don’t know what will happen in the future.... They know life goes on.”

Zerubavel, director of Rutgers University’s Allen and Joan Bildner Center for the Study of Jewish Life, gave the Ellen M. Egger Memorial Lecture at the synagogue.

Israel has changed since the War of Independence in 1948, whose mood, she said, was captured in a poem by Yaakov Cohen: “In blood and fire Judea will fall. In blood and fire will it rise.” It was also the motto of the Hashomer, the organization founded to guard Jewish settlements in the early part of the last century.

“During the War of Independence, there was the glory of rebirth,” said Zerubavel, author of *Recovered Roots: Collective Memory and the Making of the Israeli National Tradition*.

Israelis accepted the notion of self-sacrifice as 6,000 gave their lives for the establishment of the Jewish state, but few thought that acceptance would become part of the Hebrew culture or the Israeli experience, said Zerubavel.

The generation brought up in the 1950s had a strong sense of nationalism and were willing to fight for Israel’s survival “in a sea of Arabs,” she explained.

As the ’50s moved into the ’60s, the focus began to shift to the next generation.

Using biblical imagery of the binding of Isaac and Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son for God, Zerubavel said Israelis were willing to sacrifice their children for the Jewish nation.

“But there was no ram that appeared to save their sons,” she said. “Parents were focused on so much that war

widows were marginalized. War widows did not even feel they had the right to feel pain.”

After the 1967 Six-Day War, “the political reality changed” as the country moved into a period of “glorification of the heroism and euphoria” that a strong Israel would now have a secure future.

In light of that, the 1973 Yom Kippur War “came as a tremendous blow,” according to Zerubavel, bringing a sobering realization that peace and security were still elusive. Over the next several years, the Israeli perception matured and grew more complex.

“They looked differently at the state of war,” said Zerubavel. “It no longer seemed transitory. There was a growing weariness over time.”

This new view contributed to the rise of various political movements, from Peace Now on the Left to the Gush Emunim settlers’ movement on the Right. This political division deepened over time as Israelis struggled over how to deal with the Palestinian situation, Israel’s role as an occupying force, and terrorism.

The original Zionist experience and attitude faded as new generations were born and new immigrants came to Israel. Increasingly, said Zerubavel, Israelis who had willfully ignored the Diaspora experience, especially the Holocaust, now began to incorporate it more and more into their national story.

“In the 1970s, ’80s, and into the ’90s, there was a growing embracement of the Jewish experience in exile,” said Zerubavel. “Jews in the Middle East thought of the Holocaust as an Ashkenazi experience, but not their own experience. But they began to look at the Holocaust not so much as an outside Jewish experience, but as their own experience, part of Jewish culture. There was a total embracement of the connection.”

After the 1993 Oslo Accords with the Palestinians, Israelis again began to hope for peace, only to see those hopes dashed during the violence of the Intifadas. The continuing terrorism took a mental and physical toll.

Some young Israelis have coped by taking extended trips abroad. While Zerubavel noted that Rutgers always had a percentage of Israeli graduate students, she said the influx of Israeli undergraduates in recent years is a reflection of this weariness.

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