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978-0-521-29318-1 - Continuity and Change: A Study of Two Ethnic Communities in Israel

Rita James Simon

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Continuity and Change

A study of two ethnic communities in Israel

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To Julian
and for David, Judith, and Daniel

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Preface

The idea for this book was conceived during our first trip to Israel in 1968. My husband and I came to Jerusalem in January to teach at Hebrew University. Our third child was born in Jerusalem a few weeks later. At that time, the Six Day War was the most recent war. It had resulted in dramatic changes in the boundaries, demography, and mood of the country. One of the important issues that the 1967 war raised was how both the Jewish Israelis and the Israeli Arabs would relate to the Arab communities in the newly occupied territories of East Jerusalem, Hebron, Nablus, and other parts of the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip. To an outsider listening to those discussions, the position and the future of the Israeli Arabs – those Arabs who had opted to remain in Israel following partition in 1948, and who have been citizens of Israel ever since – seemed more complex and problematic than the relationship between the Arabs in the occupied territories and groups within Israeli society. The adults in the Israeli Arab community had personally experienced the transition from being members of a majority group to becoming part of a minority. In large measure, they had learned how to accommodate themselves and how to survive physically, culturally, and environmentally in a Jewish state. But what of the next generation who had not personally made the choice to remain in a Jewish state and who were growing up in a period of Arab nationalism? How did those younger Israeli Arabs define their place in Israeli society, and how did they view their future in that society?

My interest in the ultra-Orthodox Jewish community has stemmed in part from personal experience. Many of my neighbors in the area of New York City in which I spent part of my childhood looked, behaved, and dressed much like the people in Mea Shearim. The street language was the same, the articles for sale and the transactions in the shops were reminiscent of my old neighborhood. But aside from these personal interests the ultra-Orthodox community held a degree of fascina-

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tion because it was a closed community; or so it seemed to an outsider. Secular Israelis, and indeed even many who defined themselves as observant or traditional Jews were put off by the ultra-Orthodox. They had no personal contacts with them. They perceived them as one might inhabitants of a hostile but nearby island, critical of their government, and supercilious toward the values and the life style of most Israelis. Many of the older people in Mea Shearim were of the first generation. They came to Israel from the shtetls of Eastern Europe. Some came via the concentration camps or the displaced persons' camps. But the adolescents and young adults shared none of the experiences of the Diaspora. They, like the young Israeli Arabs, were all sabras (native-born Israelis). But they are sabras who are being socialized in a subculture that is different from and feels superior to the mainstream. Many of the same questions I wanted to put to the young Israeli Arabs were applicable to the young people in the ultra-Orthodox Jewish community of Mea Shearim.

I began asking my questions in 1968. Hebrew University provided me with funds to hire two assistants, and a colleague at the Institute of Communications, Michael Gurevitch, worked with me on the initial questionnaire. I returned to Israel in the fall of 1970, and with the assistance of a Ford Foundation fellowship and a small grant from the Center for International Comparative Studies at the University of Illinois, I was able to mount a larger and more intensive study. In the summer of 1973, and then again during our last trip to Israel in the fall of 1974, I went back to observe and talk with the people in those communities. The first draft of the manuscript was written in Jerusalem in 1975.

The problems of gaining access to ultra-Orthodox and Arab communities and the obstacles I encountered, particularly vis-à-vis the ultra-Orthodox, are described in some detail in Chapter 2. Perhaps only after reading that account will a reader be able to appreciate the extent of my debt of gratitude to my field staff. Without the tenaciousness, loyalty, and determination of Victor Tresczan, Hermona Hayutman, Yael Roten, Yeheskel Kuyama, and Joseph Kossman the survey in Mea Shearim would not have been carried out. For the data from the Arab communities, I relied most heavily on Mohammed Ibrahim Atamna, whose family has lived in Baqa El Garbiya for generations. Atamna supervised a staff of Arab interviewers who worked under his direction.

Once I had written a draft of the manuscript, Elaine Jacobson,

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Thelma McCormick, Julian Simon, Ida Harper Simpson, and Robin Williams provided useful criticism and suggestions that I believe considerably improved the quality of the work. I am very grateful for their help and advice.

In Jerusalem, Sylvia Farhi typed many of the early drafts, and in Urbana, Patricia Camp at the Institute of Communications Research typed the final copy. Ester Smith and Roberta Cohen helped code the questionnaire responses and analyze the data. Marcia Kirkpatrick helped find and organize many of the references. Their help is acknowledged with appreciation. To my husband and children who shared many hours with me walking around Mea Shearim and visiting families in the Arab communities, I am grateful.

One final thought. Some of the respondents in both the Arab communities and the ultra-Orthodox Jewish community explained to me on several occasions that I was dealing with extremely sensitive and delicate matters and that it was most important that I tell it “as it is” that I not exploit their situation for political or professional gain. I have tried to honor the promise I made to them.

Rita James Simon

Urbana, Illinois
January, 1978