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Introduction

THE INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL OTHER IN ISRAELI IDENTITY

This book sees the construction of Israeli-Jewish collective identity as an ongoing process rather than as the route already traveled to a definite and permanent structure. My analysis will focus on the secular Ashkenazi (European) Jews who arrived in the land called Palestine and later Israel during the twentieth century, whether out of necessity (as refugees fleeing persecutors) or to fulfill their ideological Zionist aspirations.[1] My argument will be that collective identity construction among this sector of the population has gone through several phases and the transformation has not yet ended.

The process started off with a monolithic identity constructed in opposition to the Diaspora Jew and to gentile enemies. "Monolithic" is a geological expression describing one piece of stone made of a single material. Monolithic identity construction in Israel served a positive function by creating a social entity out of different groups and tribes. During the 1970s, when Israel saw itself as stronger militarily, socially, and politically, a deconstruction of the monolithic structure began. Parts of the Israeli society and leadership, caught up in a nostalgic, idealized view of the past, saw deconstruction as regressive, while other parts of the society and some of its leadership viewed it as progress – toward a realization of internal differences and a more complex self-definition. The deconstruction or disintegration of the monolithic collective identity was painful and energy consuming, and this

[1] Although similar processes of identity construction can also be identified within other sectors of Israeli society, this book will focus on the hegemonic group to which I belong, as I do not wish to speak in the name of others.

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accounts for the later rise of neo-monolithic constructions, especially vis-à-vis external enemies, after the new outburst of violence in October 2000. Today the ascent of neo-monolithic constructions and the disintegration of previous monolithic constructions continue simultaneously. The whirlwind[2] that ensues makes it very difficult for the average citizen to answer such basic questions as "who am I?" (as part of this collective) "where do I come from" and "where am I heading?"

After reviewing these phases, I will try to show that a positive way out can be found in the development of dialogues among the bits and pieces of the disintegrated construction that do not fit together anymore (and perhaps never fit well in the first place). Such dialogue happens now only in small natural experiments or in planned laboratory settings, but there may be ways to expand such social opportunities, as I discuss in the postscript.

Changes in Israeli-Jewish identity have not taken place in a vacuum. This period has seen the world shifting from one kind of political polarity, that of good versus evil (the "enlightened" world as opposed to Nazi fascism), to another based on warring economic visions (free world capitalism as opposed to totalitarian Communism). The polarities created the need for monolithic constructions all over the world. Only after the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe in 1989 did the world face a new option of moving out of polarization. The hope, or illusion, was that the complexities of democratic political systems, which would allow a reshuffling of power through dialogue between the West and the rest of the world, would be recognized as positive. Alas, after 9/11, a neo-monolithic tendency developed in the United States. Fear of immigrants was already widespread in European countries. It is probable that U.S. citizens who were used to a collective identity constructed monolithically, first against the Nazis during World War II and later against the Communist USSR, found themselves quite anxious without an "enemy" and impelled to redefine who they were as a collective. The neo-monolithic trend became a refuge, helping them

[2] In the desert, especially during the fall, strong winds from different directions collide, whirling around the yellow and dry plains, filling up everything with dust, and blurring the sense of direction of anyone caught in it. The whirlwind is a central metaphor in my recent book, *Tell Your Life Story: Creating Dialogue among Jews and Germans, Israelis and Palestinians* (2006 in German, 2004).

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overcome their fears after the vicious terrorist attacks. Yet, in their case as well, disintegration of monolithic constructions continued, catching them between two opposing forces, so that they found difficulty in placing and redefining themselves.

In addition, it is not only national, political drama that leads to disintegration of monolithic construction. Gender, religious, and ethnic issues too have evoked changes in collective identities, particularly in the Western world. After the monolithic phase ended in the Western world, those who had been considered Others often searched desperately for a "voice" long suppressed by the traditional hegemonic system of representation (Gur-Zeev, 2003). "Multiculturalism" is more an aspiration than a reality in many modern societies. They have their difficulties creating a significant dialogue between the "voices," particularly when power relations are asymmetrical. When disparate voices begin to ring out at the same time, struggling to replace the traditional hegemony of power, they sound like a choir off-key, each striving to be heard rather than to listen or blend in with other voices in creation of a meaningful dialogue.

Terms used for recent developments – for example, "postmodernism," "globalization," and "multiculturalism" – be they positive, neutral, or derogatory, can be contrasted with older descriptions such as "modernism" and "divided world," and with previous hegemonic names (Ram, 1993). The question is whether these are only terminological changes or whether they reflect a meaningful transition toward dialogue and containment of complexities. In the United States, for instance, we find multiculturalism in the form of public school classes taught in pupils' mother tongues, such as Spanish or Russian, rather than in English. This was inconceivable in the fifties or the sixties, even in a democratic land populated mainly by the descendants of immigrants. In parallel, political correctness became a test of virtue in the daily use of language (Taub, 1997). In Israel, feminist, Oriental, Haredi (ultra-Orthodox), and Russian voices compete today for political power, although Ashkenazi hegemony still holds sway in politics, the military, and the economic center. These could all be signs of moving toward multiculturalism and dialogue. Nonetheless, there are always those (usually belonging to the traditional hegemony) who view these changes as negative, longing for the good old monolithic days.

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In examining current neo-monolithic tendencies, the role of renewed religious and nationalistic fundamentalism deserves special attention. A powerful backlash is especially noticeable in countries evincing a deep sensitivity to threats of the previous monolithic constructions disintegrating. For example, Iran's backlash to fundamental Islam was a reaction to the fast move into modernization initiated by the Shah during the 1960s. In certain fundamentalist Muslim movements, the Americans and Jews are now the personification of total evil, as oppressors of the Arabs or the Palestinians. In parallel, the Palestinians represent total evil to Jewish fundamentalist and racist groups. To the extremists, the evil is genetic rather than a result of any particular act they commit. Therefore, anyone who compromises or gives up any part of the Land of Israel is in the category of *din rodef*. This religious construct permits one to kill in order not to be killed by another. Because the late prime minister favored making peace with the Other, some ultra-nationalist Jewish rabbis declared that judgment against him shortly before Rabin was assassinated by Yigal Amir, a member of an extremist group.

On one hand, extreme neo-monolithic constructions paradoxically support the disintegration of old monolithic constructions. Yet, at the same time, they present the illusion of an alternative that is even more solid, one that beckons to those who are afraid and unable to cope with the ambiguity of the disintegration process. In chaotic times, many people seek an anchor, support, or authority. The possibility of dialogue between the various components of identity is not perceived as a strong counterweight to chaos that can achieve results quickly enough – particularly when groups that consider the Western Other absolute evil, such as Al-Qaeda, hammer away in the background.

IDENTITY FORMATION

The sociopsychological approach to identity construction distinguishes between two different processes (if we momentarily ignore intermediate possibilities): Either identity takes shape in opposition to an "Other" or it is formed through an internal dialogue among the various components of the identity that do not fit together (Gergen, 1991; Sarup, 1996). The

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first process requires minimal energy, as the perceived characteristics of the Other supply the necessary contrast for defining one's own superior monolithic "self." Sherif's idea of an overriding goal (1966) is part of the literature that shows how it is easier at first to unite under a collective construction of identity, faced by an enemy. Nonetheless, in the long run, considerable energy may be needed to preserve a monolithic construction when, inevitably, conflicting components of the identity cannot be held together anymore. A dialogue process is then necessary to bring together various components of the identity that became incompatible over time. At such a stage, the quality of the dialogue rather than one of the components determines how the collective identity is reconstructed.

According to mid-twentieth-century American concepts of social psychology, social identity stems from one's personal identity (Allport, 1985). In contrast, the European notion identified representation of the collective as a dominant component of personal identity and a prerequisite to understanding the behavior of the individual (Moscovici, 1976; Potter and Wetherell, 1990; Tajfel, 1982). Recently, the concept of identity has become increasingly complex. Identity seems to be composed of contrasts and fragments that are not easily reconcilable. This may not be always obvious, as people try hard to present themselves in a consistent and coherent way (Goffman, 1959). Postmodern thinking has led to relinquishing the concept of identity in favor of "biography" (Fischer-Rosenthal, 1995). Instead of an ostensibly objective and stable *structure* that persists within the individual, a fluid *process* is described. Our biographies are being rewritten constantly, as events and changes in the present – those occurring within us as well as within the external reality – influence our perceptions of past and future (Fischer-Rosenthal, 1995).

According to Anthony Giddens (1991, p. 73), in "societies where modernity is well developed," individuals must make decisions about who they are and how to enact that understanding. It is an ongoing process, a "continuous reflexive endeavor."[3] We create, maintain, and amend sets of narratives to conform to our perceptions of events. This provides continuity between

[3] Thanks to an anonymous reviewer not only for this turn of phrase but for the references and clarifications provided.

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what we experience and what we expect from the future. In traditional societies, self-image tends to be stable. The pace of change is slower and social structures are less complex, with clear delineation of roles. Those who come to Israel from such societies find themselves plunged into a modern social order, often with few tools and little preparation for radical revision of their biographies. They have incentive to latch onto the monolithic Zionist narrative, even as it is disintegrating. Many immigrants from the West, inclined to come for ideological reasons and ready to construct identities anew, also identify with the hegemonic social narrative.

Longtime residents too may hold tenaciously to its monolithic identity construction. Upheaval challenges the ability to integrate new experiences, and Israel is not only a society of immigrants but turbulent in its own right. The monolithic construction is fostered through ritual and custom, literature and song, in schools, public settings, and in some cases family lore. Beliefs and behaviors of individuals are affected when they identify with the collective (Kimmerling and Moore, 1997). Given a meaningful social and cultural identity to hold on to, identification extends to its successes and failures, privileges and lack of privileges (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

When stability and calm prevail in modern society, there is more freedom to express aspects of identity that derive from personal biography, whether or not they are valued by the collective. One aspect or another may dominate at any given time, depending on time, place, and the nature of a social interaction. Some social identities are mutually exclusive (one is either female or male), while others may be clustered (white Anglo-Saxon Protestant) or ordered hierarchically – competition of these identities within the individual leads to construction of a hierarchy that differs from one member of a collective to another (Stryker & Serpe, 1994). Threat and turmoil to a society impinge upon the flexibility of this process.

Representations of Other and self play a central role in the personal and collective biographical process, with all its changes. The Other can be constructed in a monolithic way, in opposition to a stable, integrated self. Or, the Other can be perceived as dynamic, undergoing changes in the same way that the self changes throughout its personal and collective life. Furthermore, the Other can be perceived as an *infinity* that cannot ever be fully represented within the *totality* of self-representation: the self tries to

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build its representation as a fixed structure, while the "Other-ness" of the Other is infinite (Lévinas, 1990). Edward Said (1979), following Arendt (1958), points out the component of power relationships between the self and the Other: The Other and self are fictitious representations intended to legitimize the elitism and hegemony of the collective self in order to continue to oppress and control the Other. Said's concept of orientalism dealt with the manner in which representation of the Arab Other was defined by *Eurocentrism* that sought to control and maintain the elitism and hegemony of Western society. Henriette Dahan Kalev (1997) maintained that Zionism is a private case of this Eurocentric approach, especially as concerns its attitude toward the Oriental ethnic groups of Jews within Israeli society.

Considering the changes that have taken place in Israeli society and its environment, how has representation of the Other expressed itself in Israeli-Jewish identity, as opposed to previous Jewish identity constructions? This question is addressed here through examining the representation of the Other in Jewish-Israeli identity from a sociopsychological perspective, while choosing to depart from quantitative research approaches in favor of a focus on biographical qualitative studies (Bar-On, 1995). Jewish tradition has attributed many meanings to the Other, beginning with the interpretation of Holy Scriptures, Jewish law, and the Kabbalah,[4] through the social-community tradition, to sociological and political conceptualization. This work will focus on the sociopsychological aspect of representation of the Other without undermining the significance of other aspects. I examine the internal and interpersonal emotional processes involved in constructing personal and collective identities, while addressing the social and historic context in which these processes have taken place. There will be an attempt to show how, in Israeli-Jewish society, and especially among its Western-oriented secular members, the representation of the Other has undergone significant changes during recent decades. The four main phases described in this context are also the subject matter of the book's four chapters.

[4] Two different ways of interpreting the Holy Scriptures, the *halachah* [law] represents more institutionalized Jewish rabbinical thinking, while the Kabbalah represents more of the Gnostic and mystic thinking that evolved in opposition to *halachah*.

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The chapters show the transition from one generation to the next. Israeli monolithic identity, with its black-and-white contrasting of self and Other, changes in the disintegration phase and later reverts to the neo-monolithic phase. This phase may yet lead in the future to dialogue among the various components of the disintegrated identity.

1. The past: Monolithic identity construction

The monolithic phase was, first of all, an internal Jewish construction. The Zionist movement sought to differentiate itself from traditional religious and Diaspora Jewish identity constructions, emphasizing the new, emerging collective-Zionist self. We will soon see that initially the Zionist hegemonic identity construction internalized anti-Semitic images of the Diaspora Jew and promised to create a "new" Jew who would "heal" the negative attributes through strength, economic self-sufficiency, and willingness to fight for personal and collective independence in the Old-New Land (Raz-Krakotzkin, 1994). Later, with the establishment of the State of Israel, the new Jew was redefined as the *sabra*[5] who was born in Israel and fought for its independence. When massive numbers of Jews emigrated from the Arab countries in the 1940s and 1950s, another threatening Other was identified, albeit Jewish. These Jewish arrivals had to assimilate totally to the new *sabra* identity, which, paradoxically, became a continuation of European, Western Jewish identity construction (Shenhav, 2003).

Secondarily, the monolithic construction was based on the definition of threatening gentile Others. The perception of these external Others was shaped by generations of experiencing persecution, especially within Christian Europe of the Middle Ages. To the familiar gentile Christian Other, two new Others were added during the twentieth century. The Nazi was rightfully perceived as an existential threat to the personal and collective Jewish self. Later, the Middle Eastern Arabs were perceived as a continuation of the German Nazis, trying to annihilate the Jews in their region. In the emerging

[5] The *sabra* (prickly pear) is a cactus fruit, common in Arab lands but originally from Mexico, that has thorns on the outside and is soft inside. This became the nickname for the "new" Israeli, who conceals a kind heart with brusque manners that successfully disassociate him or her from the Diaspora Jew.

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Israeli society, the self was mobilized in an existential struggle against those Others. Thus collective Israeli identity construction was mobilized monolithically against the threat of internal Jewish and external gentile Others. The multiplicity of Others reinforced monolithic construction of Zionist hegemonic identity as an "absolute good," in opposition to the "total evil" represented most clearly by Nazi Germany and the Holocaust (Hadar, 1991).

2. The present I: Disintegration of the monolithic construction

The past four decades have seen a gradual disintegration of the monolithic construction of hegemonic Zionist and Jewish-Israeli identities. The disintegration process slowly revealed internal contradictions that may have existed from the outset within Jewish-Israeli identity, in terms of multiple ethnicities, internal conflicts around the roles of religion and gender, and the like. The monolithic construction was functional during the early years of the State of Israel. At a time of massive hardships, it helped bind Jews who came from all over the world and had very little in common beyond fulfilling a two-thousand-year-old dream of return to their homeland. But as the situation became more relaxed, objectively speaking, the energy and effort invested in preserving a monolithic construction became more evident and more questionable. It became impossible to continue to construct an Israeli-Jewish identity totally different from the identity of the Diaspora Jew. With significant cultural, ethnic, religious, and gender diversity within the Jewish-Israeli population, correlations involving social stratification and political power differentiation could no longer be covered up. Neither was it possible to continue to define the external Other only on the basis of what had happened during the *Shoah* (Holocaust) (Segev, 1992). The Likud party took over the government after the elections of 1977, a sign of new voices emerging from within Israeli-Jewish society to question the initial hegemonic power structure. The monolithic identity construction had bolstered this structure's dominance over other parts of the Israeli society for the state's first three decades.

Jewish Others who were once perceived as threatening or opposing Zionist identity construction could now also be seen as part of a complex, more multicultural system. Israeli Jews acknowledged that certain aspects of their

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collective "self' contained elements of the Diaspora itself.[6] Even the kibbutz no longer seemed so different from the Jewish *shtetl* in Poland. In the early years, kibbutz members had perceived their settlements as a complete antithesis of such villages, which they viewed as old-fashioned and decadent.

The disintegration of monolithic construction did not happen at once or in a linear and systematic way. There were ups and downs. Certain parts of the monolithic identity construction survived while others were disintegrating. For example, the military retained its initial monolithic prestige into the late eighties and nineties, in spite of some cracks that dated back to the 1973 war (Kimmerling, 1993).

3. The present II: The neo-monolithic construction

The peace process with Egypt in 1977 and the Oslo Accord of 1993 brought new possibilities to the forefront of the Israeli-Jewish agenda. Each substantial step encouraged people to dispel notions of the external Other as the enemy. Now it seemed realistic to imagine previous enemies as partners in a future peaceful coexistence. Disintegration of the monolithic perception of the Jewish Other, already in progress, could now accompany disintegration of the monolithic construction around external Others.

Much of Israeli society perceived total disintegration of the monolithic construction as a threat to the identity of Israeli Jews, however. Who were they if not defined through those threatening Others? The process of disintegration provoked pain, confusion, and even existential fear. Even when the process was well under way, the illusion prevailed that it would be possible at some point to reestablish the monolithic construction anew. The outbreak of violence in October 2000, like the vicious 9/11 attacks in the United States the next year, established a neo-monolithic construction in Israel and among Jews and non-Jews in other countries. The old fear of the external Other who could not be trusted was awakened; apparently this Other was, after all, just waiting for the right moment to annihilate the Jews.

[6] In this context, Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin coined the phrase "negating the negation of the Diaspora" (1994).

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