

‘What makes one an Israeli?’ Negotiating identities in everyday representations of ‘Israeliness’*

RAKEFET SELA-SHEFFY

Unit of Culture Research, Tel Aviv University Israel

ABSTRACT. This paper examines the construction of a sense of Israeli identity which is not deducible from the public political discourse. It analyses common verbal representations of ‘being an Israeli person’, namely, what people in contemporary Israeli culture repeatedly say about Israelis, and how they position themselves vis-à-vis the commonsensical agreements they exchange, assuming that the massive use of such *clichés* in certain contexts creates a discursive routine that has ‘a life of its own’, through which people constantly negotiate their self-images and their sense of belonging. It investigates the ways these representations create solidarity or demarcation and how such current popular representations relate to canonical veteran images of Israeli identity, notably that of the pre-state ‘Native Israeli’ (*Sabra*) archetype. The analysis is based on 295 anonymous open responses to the question ‘What makes one an Israeli?’ published weekly in the Weekend Supplement of *Maariv*, the second largest newspaper in Israel, between 1996 and 1998. The analysis has led to the following observations: (1) Instead of the most expected grand ideological (ethnic, national, religious, etc.) issues of conflict, the responses reveal a ‘pursuit of culturedness’, using an implied scale of mastering good manners and possessing a ‘genuine culture’ which form the dominant parameter of judging the ‘Israeli person’. (2) A tension between mainstream and marginalised groups is shaped by a ‘chase and flight’ dynamic of embracing and rejecting the mythological *Sabra* image (in asymmetry with these groups’ assumed political stances), which image is believed to be a symbol of the once hegemonic veteran elite. (3) This tension paradoxically contributes to the persistence of the canonical image of the *Sabra* that is currently delegitimised by much intellectual discourse.

Introduction

The social construction of Israeli identity is often viewed too restrictedly as a straightforward political act. Whenever questions of Israeli identity are

* Previous versions of this article were presented at the EAJS Congress, Toledo, July 1998; the AIS 16th International Annual Meeting, Tel-Aviv, June 2000; and the International Research Seminar, ‘Convergence, Technology and Cultural Impacts’, Durban, May 2002. I thank my students Nir Cohen, Michal Windzberg and Nahuel Ribke for their help. I am grateful to Robert Paine for his critical reading and comments.

approached, a set of ideological issues – such as right and left, minorities and ethnic groupings, or secularity and religiosity – presents itself as if by reflex, determining the scope of discussion with little leeway for insights of other kinds.¹ To be sure, these have always been central concerns of the deliberate Zionist enterprise of making Modern Israeli (formerly ‘Hebrew’)² culture. Moreover, ever since the late 1970s, these issues have been at the heart of a bitter public debate, a debate that in the past two decades has reached a new climax, to the point that the term ‘culture war’ has become a common cliché. However, as effective as this debate has been in the shaping of different variants of an Israeli political consciousness, it is by no means the only channel through which people actually form their sense of identity and self-image as ‘Israelis’.

Focusing on the large-scale ideological categories of national, ethnic and religious affiliations, the public and academic discourse on Israeliness presents a rather dramatic conflict between polar options of identity. One such highly politicised conflict revolves around the antagonism between the so-called ‘Oriental’ (*Mizraxi*) and ‘Western’ (*Ashkenazi*) identity. This ethnic cleavage is associated with the alienation between newcomers and veterans, evoked through cultural marginalisation and economic setback during the early period of statehood (Ben-Rafael and Sharot 1991; Eisenstadt 1986; Ben-Sira 1988; Peled 1998; Lissak 1999). Closely linked to it is the tension between the *Native Israeli* identity and that of the *Jewish Diaspora*, namely, the tension between a secular modern national culture and a traditional one. This tension is inherited from the pre-state Zionist discourse of the founding fathers (Bartal 1994; Even-Zohar 1990 [1980]; Shavit 1987; Shapira 1997), and is now being revised by the contemporary post-Zionist one (Kimmerling 2001; Raz-Karkotzkin 1994; Zuckerman 2001). An outstanding symbol of the once hegemonic Native Israeli culture (taken to be *Ashkenazi* and secular) is the *Sabra* archetype – an ideal personification of the patriotic, collectivist and altruistic ‘indigenously Israeli’ ethos. Named after a prickly-pear, that is a cactus that yields sweet fruits inhabiting the local landscape, this icon combines the warrior with the ‘son of the land’, endowed with physical virtues and moral integrity, in opposition to the frail, cunning urban figure of the Diaspora Jew (Almog 1997; Elboim-Dror 1996; Shapira 1996; Sivan 1991). Here is, for instance, how the historian Anita Shapira delineates this mythological portrait in the dedication of her book to the memory of Yitzhak Rabin, who in recent years has become the most outstanding icon of the *Sabra*:

... Yitzhak Rabin, who embodies the figure of the New Jew: A Native Son, who knows every *waddi* and every rock, direct and honest, his mouth and heart are equal; shy and modest, who loves doing and hates words. The man who knew to integrate the power of steel of Zahal [the Israeli Army; R.S.] with the cleverness of the politician and the braveness of a leader; ... (Shapira 1997).

However, being considered today a symbol of the veteran *Ashkenazi* elite, this icon is now resented and delegitimised by the post-Zionist discourse (to quote Zucker’s slogan: ‘The *Sabra* must go’; Zucker 1999).

This resentment stands at the core of today's prevailing narrative, according to which Israeli cultural identity undergoes an accelerated process of 'sectorialisation'. Whether or not this is seen as a collapse of an oppressive veteran elite, and as a step toward a post-Zionist and multicultural society (e.g. Kimmerling 1998 and 2001; Ben-Simon 1997; Yona and Shenhav 2000), scholars and other culture critics tend to agree on the declining power of a mainstream unifying 'Native Israeli' culture, as it were, and the resurfacing of primordial Jewish and ethnic sentiments (e.g. Deshen 1989; Beit-Hallahmi and Sobel 1991; Liebman and Katz 1997; Peled 1998). This process, so it is agreed, was initiated mainly in the overthrowing of the hegemony of the founders by oppressed groups – mostly of Oriental origins – who are themselves now struggling to reaffirm their own cultural legacies as alternative to the once imposed collective Israeli identity and allegedly false national solidarity. To an extent it is also believed to be the effect of globalisation and the growing acceptance of a capitalist economy and so-called liberal-individualist worldviews (Roniger 1994; Moore and Kimmerling 1995, Ram 2000; Shafir and Peled 1998).

Against these grand outlines of identity, fashioning the sense of 'Israeliness' in everyday representations seems to make use of a different kind of shared social knowledge, in more versatile ways. By 'everyday representations' I mean the diverse routines – in speech and action – through which people constantly negotiate their self-images and their perception of doing things in all aspects of life, or what J. Davis calls 'popular sociability', as distinguished from 'creative activity which is directed to making rules for others' (Davis 1994: 98). My concern in this paper lies in the verbal production of such commonsensical agreements on 'being an Israeli person', namely, in what people in contemporary Israeli culture would repeatedly say about Israelis, and in how they position themselves vis-à-vis the representations they exchange. Central to my examination are the ways these representations create solidarity or demarcation. Is there an agreement at all about a shared experience of being Israeli, and what are its most accepted images? I also want to examine how current popular representations relate to canonical images of identity established by the public official discourse. Especially intriguing would be the evocation or rejection of the once glorified *Sabra* archetype, which today is being discredited by much intellectual discourse.

Analysis

1. *The sample*

The following is an outline of a study of such representations, proposed by ordinary people in the media. I have examined 295 contributions to the column 'What makes one an Israeli?' which appeared in the weekend supplement of *Maariv*, the second largest daily newspaper in Israel, between winter 1996 and spring 1998. Readers, usually identified only by name and place of residence, were invited to offer a one-sentence definition of 'an Israeli'. The responses were recorded as messages on the newspaper's voice

mailbox. The sample at hand holds all the responses which appeared in the column week by week on a regular basis, save 45 that were solicited on special traumatic occasions from casualties of terror and military actions or their relatives. In addition, the column was often accompanied by contributions solicited from famous personalities – politicians, artists and other celebrities. These contributions tend to be more lengthy and personal. Altogether, there were twenty-eight such special contributions. They, too, are not included in the analysed sample, but I will refer to them later in the discussion.

The limitations of such evidence from the media as authentic everyday-life expressions are obvious. First, these are not spontaneous reactions captured in real everyday interactions, but rather intended articulations, offered wilfully to be published. Still there is an advantage in this source over the different surveys and public opinion polls (e.g. Binyamini 1969; Hasin 1987; Natanson and Livnat-Yung 1998; and many others), in that the contributors use their own idiom and classifications instead of passively responding to categories and presuppositions imposed by the researcher (Bourdieu 1983). As expected from a trivial newspaper genre such as this column, the responses often tend to be witty and one-dimensional. As such, however, they are not entirely devoid of serious intent. At any rate, like other forms of folkloristic witticisms, they play a role in conveying – and shaping – popular outlooks and sentiments. Secondly, being a random given collection of responses, this source is not intended as a sample corpus, as it is obviously unrepresentative with regard to the different sectors of society. Particular communities like *Kibbutzim*, newcomers, orthodox Jewish or Arab communities, settlements in the territories and others are least represented or not represented at all.³ Still, *Maariv's* readership is large and heterogeneous enough to provide an unmarked evidence of Israeli idiom, worthy of investigating. Moreover, there is nothing specifically characteristic to *Maariv's* readership with respect to the style and content of these representations. In fact, similar such witty definitions of Israeliness appear every now and then in other newspapers and magazines and in Internet web sites, and they all sound very much alike. Obviously, the sample at hand includes contributions only by people who have access to *Maariv*, and among them, only by those who care enough to take a stance and be heard in the media. These contributors eventually constitute a more active agency in shaping and distributing images of 'Israeliness'.

And thirdly, editorial intervention is obviously also a factor here, although in this case it was minimal. The editor, Devorit Shragal, explained in a personal communication that apart from 'extremely rude' messages that were ruled out at the outset, the responses were printed word by word. The problem was mainly in their selection. The 5–10 responses that appeared in each issue were selected from dozens, often hundreds, of contributions received each week. No record is kept of the thousands of unpublished messages. According to Shragal, the general idea was to reflect as wide a spectrum of articulations as possible without granting priority to political stances. Nevertheless, a corrective policy was employed in favour of women with a view to keeping a gender-balanced representation. And the same holds for bearers of so-called 'Oriental' (*Mizraxi*) names.⁴

In view of all this, it should be stressed from the outset that I by no means expect this sample to reveal a supposedly comprehensive symbolic structure of Israeli identity. However, as random and lacking as this sample may be, all the responses at hand strike as highly familiar to an Israeli ear, like the abundant commonplaces Israelis tend to exchange on suitable social occasions. And this is precisely where they are so revealing. Their perpetuation by so many different people suggests that they form *a stock of clichés that people find worth using* when engaged in certain socialisation rituals. There is no need to assume that these are the 'ultimate stances' of the respondents that are expressed here, nor that they will always be expressed by the same respondents in all events. Nevertheless, the massive use of such clichés in certain contexts creates a discursive routine that has 'a life of its own'. I therefore view this stock of clichés as one of many verbal rituals through which people confirm their participation in a group, mark their position within it, and thereby maintain its cohesion (Katriel 1999).

2. *The respondents*

The scarcity of information about the respondents makes any speculation about their socio-cultural profile extremely crude. Some observations, though, may be suggested regarding their places of residence, a factor which enables us to divide them into two main groups, as follows:

The larger group is miscellaneous (see table in appendix): 200 out of 295 respondents come from seventy-two different urban and rural localities scattered all over Israel. Sixty-three per cent of them (126 people) are residents of the largest urban districts in Israel (the three major cities and their suburban towns). Moreover, seventy-three per cent (146 people) live in the central, more populated and wealthy region of the country, most often in established communities of the 'veteran *Yishuv*' (i.e. communities founded in the pre-statehood period).⁵

About the other ninety-five respondents we have a little more information: sixty-five of them are residents of six development towns in the southern region of Israel (the towns are: Dimona, Mizpe-Ramon, Netivot, Ofaqim, Sederot and Yeruxam). Founded during the early 1950s and populated mainly by newcomers, these communities are often stigmatised as symbols of socio-economic backwardness, ethnic discrimination, and religious fundamentalism, as well as a right-wing political orientation. Unlike the majority of random responses, these were intentionally grouped together according to the respondents' town of residence (to which the column was dedicated in a certain issue). In addition, the respondents in this group are also identified by their age and occupational status (the distribution of age is quite balanced, with twenty-four people unemployed, 'housewives' or retired). In addition to those from development towns, ten responses are by taxi drivers and another ten by stall holders in Ben-Yehuda market in Jerusalem, two occupational sectors which are similarly stigmatised. Another ten responses are by teachers and educators.

3. *Two models of representation*

Broadly speaking, the sample discloses two different ways of talking about the 'Israeli person', using two different models of representation.⁶ These two models differ not only by their selection of content components, but also by their patterns of talk and the attitudes they demonstrate.

3.1. *'The ugly Israeli'*

The dominant model used here may be labelled 'the ugly Israeli' (although this expression itself, which is a very common idiom in the Israeli self-reflective discourse, never appears in those representations).⁷ In all, 180 responses (sixty-one per cent of the sample) reveal a consensus regarding the misbehaviour of Israelis. As a rule, the idea of 'Israeliness' which emerges here refers to a *personality type* rather than to a set of abstract notions or values. It does, however, entail criticism on deteriorated manners and a loss of solid civil norms and values, whether those of European 'civilised culture' in general or those derived from the legacy of Zionism in particular. Focusing on everyday conduct, the disposition of the Israeli, as these respondents see it, is usually exemplified through a stock of habitual situations and practices, using everyday cultural goods, among which the most recurring are cars and driving habits; TV viewing; money; food and eating; littering and cleanness; demeanour with family, neighbours and friends; behaviour in public spaces, especially in queues, elevators, hotels or supermarkets; and the encounter with foreign cultures, especially with things American.

The most characteristic personal traits repeated in these responses can be listed as follows:

(1) *Lack of manners, rudeness and the violations of social norms*

This disposition is usually described against an implied background of 'Western' etiquette and good manners, such as the various forms of politeness, cleanness, restraint, decency and respect, held to comprise a self-evident paradigm of civilised behaviour. For instance: 'An Israeli is someone who pushes out the door ahead of you and lets it slam in your face. If you walk out before him and hold the door – he does not say "thank you"';⁸ or: 'An Israeli is a driver who arrives at a red light, opens the door and empties the ashtray on the ground'. Sometimes, a lament for the vanished ideal of the 'beautiful Israeli' – with a special accent on the love of nature and the land – creeps in as an implied (violated) standard of correctness (Millner 1994), for example: 'An Israeli is someone who goes on field trips just in order to scratch his name on trees and stones'. In other cases sheer aggressiveness is hinted at, with dangerous behaviour on the roads being most common illustrations. For instance: 'An Israeli is someone who drives through a pedestrian crossing while people are still crossing it'.

(2) *Opportunism, manipulation and self-interest*

This trait entails eagerness to serve one's interests even at the expense of others, be they other persons or institutions. For instance: 'An Israeli is

someone who takes his nephew along on honeymoon because a child in the room is free of charge'; 'An Israeli is someone who places his own garbage in the neighbours' dustbin'; or 'An Israeli is someone who wants to buy the largest item for the lowest price, and so deceive the one who receives the gift'. Self-centredness and evading civil duties also pertain to this disposition, as in the following examples: 'An Israeli is someone who asks himself what else the country can do for him'; or: 'An Israeli is someone who sends his children to school and thinks he is done with his responsibilities for their education'.

Some responses highlight this trait, using a very popular expression in today's spoken Hebrew slang, '*kombina*' (for instance: 'An Israeli is someone who does everything by way of "*kombina*"). Although, surprisingly, the use of this expression itself is scarce in this sample, many representations illustrate exactly what it conveys to Hebrew speakers, which means operating in devious (albeit creative) ways, with a compulsive need to get more for less investment, including getting things for free, bargaining and making suspicious 'deals'. All this is suggested by many of these responses. For instance: 'An Israeli is someone who asks "are you selling the car?" and when your answer is negative he asks "how much do you want for it?"; or 'An Israeli is someone who can lose fifteen thousand sheqels at the casino, and will argue with the taxi driver over a single sheqel'. However, like many other notions of such enormous cultural vitality, the notion of '*kombina*' is rather fuzzy, allowing sometimes also for a measure of virtue, like resourcefulness and the ability to improvise, informality and anti-pedantry. All these are also implied in the sample at hand; for instance: 'An Israeli would always come to the express till in the supermarket meant for up to five items, with eight, and the cashier will always accept that'; or: 'an Israeli is someone who sends you to David's shop and says: "tell him that Shimon sent you"'.

(3) *Double-standards, lack of self-criticism and intolerance*

For instance: 'An Israeli is someone who jumps the queue and wants to know why others are pushy'; 'An Israeli is someone who drives thirty kilometers an hour over the speed limit and when someone else drives faster than him', says: "drivers like that should be kept off the road"; 'An Israeli is someone who arrives from abroad, talks about how clean it is there, and throws his cigarette on the floor at the airport'. In a few cases, hypocrisy is mentioned with specific reference to the Israelis' observance of Judaism and religious lifestyle; for instance: 'An Israeli is someone who goes to McDonald's on Saturday, and makes a point of having hamburger without cheese' (mixing meat with dairy products is prohibited by the Jewish Rabbinic law; but so is going to entertainment facilities on Saturday).

(4) *A know-all presumptuousness*

For instance: 'An Israeli is an opinionated analyst on every subject, always knows what should be done before, during and after, and it's a shame they did not consult with him in real time'; 'An Israeli is someone who, while going up

a ski-lift, gives copious instructions to the skiers around him, and in the end slides down on a piece of nylon sheet'; or simply: 'An Israeli always knows better than anyone else'.

(5) *Materialism, greediness, competitiveness and excessiveness*

Interestingly, Israelis are described here as being motivated by material – rather than intellectual – competition. For instance: 'The Israeli sees his neighbour coming with a new car, calls a family gathering and tries to find out where the money came from'; 'An Israeli is someone who receives a gift from abroad and goes to a shop to find out how much it costs' or: 'An Israeli is someone who goes to a movie and asks friends to call him on his cell phone, so that everyone knows he's got one' (although today, when almost anyone has a cell phone, this representation would sound dated).

(6) *A parochial admiration for worldly cultures, mainly for America*

Fascination with foreign cultures is ridiculed for being based on nothing but these cultures' standard icons of popular culture. Yet, the ultimate statement here emphasises the disregard of one's own cultural resources, rather than his/her ignorance of the 'world culture'. For example: 'an Israeli is someone who eats [at] McDonald's, listens to MTV, celebrates New Years Eve and does not understand Arabic'; or: 'An Israeli is someone who thinks that English is more important than Arabic, and always looks in the direction of America'.⁹ Sometimes the attraction of America is presented as a syndrome of total identity disorientation: 'An Israeli is someone who wears an Israeli shirt while in the US, and changes into an American-flag shirt when arriving in Israel'.

Discussion.

Obviously, the profile arising from all these examples is the remotest from that of the legendary *Sabra* archetype, whose celebrated qualities are intimate bond to the land, devotion, courage, comradeship, straightforwardness, candidness and integrity (Katriel 1986; Elboim-Dror 1996; Shapira 1996; Almog 1997). A most conspicuous feature of all these representations is their sarcastic critical tone. This sarcasm stands in sharp contrast to the glorification of the *Sabra* in the patriotic discourse, such as in past romanticising representations of it as a 'noble savage' and an altruistic warrior.¹⁰ In a few cases this allusion is made quite clear, indicating the speakers' disillusion with present-day Israeli deteriorated mentality and cultural disorientation, as in the following examples: 'an Israeli is someone born with a great deal of courage, which over the years has turned into impudence' (this rings like a bitter paraphrase on the *Sabra*'s once admired combination of 'boldness' and 'cheekiness');¹¹ or: 'An Israeli is someone who dances on tables in pubs and sings songs of Eretz-Israel, without knowing what the *Palmach*, *Hagana*, *Etzel* and *Nili* were' (*Nili*, *Hagana*, *Palmach* and *Etzel* [known in English as 'the *Irgun*'] are names of Jewish underground organisations in pre-state times).

Yet, direct references to the *Sabra* are usually rare in these representations. In most cases, the language used, as well as the selection of items and situations, are all drawn from contemporary cultural settings, and are devoid of any nostalgic allusions. Furthermore, the portrait emerging from these representations seems sometimes closer to that of the (negative) Eastern-European *Jewish* stereotype than to the *Sabra* one, especially when the 'smart-ass' quality and the tendency to bargain and manoeuvre are accentuated. This association, which echoes the Zionist negation of 'the old Jew', sustains the sense of alienation the respondents convey regarding the type of Israeli person they try to portray.

Two facts strike as important in perceiving of this model of representation: First, in contrast to the accepted views voiced in the media on the 'hodge-podge of Israeli culture' (see Levi-Yinowich 1999), in this case people seem to find no difficulty in generalising on a collective Israeli character, disregarding ethnic origins, classes, genders, beliefs, or whatever other factors of distinction. Only very few responses express hesitation to make generalisations (for instance: 'An Israeli is someone who does not know what to say when asked what makes one an Israeli'), but even these do not mention any specific parameter of cultural differences. Such responses are intended as meta-discursive, expressing critique on the very attempt to define Israeli identity, which they see in itself as patronising and discriminating (For instance: 'An Israeli is someone who calls the newspaper's voice mailbox just to come down on other Israelis who behave exactly like him'). The fact that all these respondents make no reference to cultural differentiations or conflicts does not mean that these issues are insignificant in their eyes, as if there were absolute consent across Israeli society. It can be fairly assumed that on many occasions, the very same respondents would split radically on issues of identity. This fact only means that, on certain other occasions, these people may also find it natural and worthwhile to provide a shared notion of Israeliness without hesitation.

However, it is a 'them' rather than a 'we' generalised identity which is represented here. The sarcastic, condescending tone in most of these responses indicates that the speakers dissociate themselves from those who may embody this unpleasant collective portrait: it could apply to anyone other than the contributor her/himself. The subtext therefore implies an ideal notion of 'Israeliness', an aspired-to identity which the actual average Israeli person fails to live up to, with a hint of reproach (i.e. 'it's not what we wish for ourselves') or wishful-thinking (i.e. 'Israelis should be better than they actually are').

Secondly, other most central public concerns are hardly mentioned here either. There are only few vague allusions to national historical events, or to current political issues, including the impact of terror on Israeli life.¹² Even military service is mentioned by these responses only seven times (and not as an expression of patriotism, but merely as yet another illustration of the egocentric, competitive male-chauvinist syndrome). The only public issue that is foregrounded in these representations is the fascination with foreign cultures, notably

with America. Now, being a common topic of Israeli popular culture critique, the issue of Americanisation is often contradictory (Azaryahu 2000), indicating lack of authenticity and tastelessness, or, on the contrary, up-to-datedness, sophistication and success. This ambivalence notwithstanding, in this sample the negative implications prevail. The cult of America implies a *nouveau riche* pretentiousness (for instance: 'An Israeli is someone who lives in Yavne [formerly a development town; R.S.], yet knows better than any American what show in Broadway one should see, and in which restaurant in Manhattan one should eat'), as well as disharmony with the local geo-cultural space (for instance: 'An Israeli is someone who is at home in London and New York, but doesn't know how to get to Zippori and Peqiin' [two ancient Hebrew spots in the Galilee]).

Given the fact that the newspaper column in which these representations appeared constituted a *domestic* forum – and not one addressing a foreign readership – this choice of themes is arresting. From a domestic point of view, it proposes an in-group distinction between those endowed with – or aspiring at – 'authentic Israeli culture' and those ignorant of, or lacking the competence to appropriate it. It also implies the existence of a self-evident, widely shared repertoire of Israeli forms of life, which the respondents apparently take for granted while juxtaposing the genuine and the false – or what does and what does not fit in with Israeli cultural identity.

3.2. 'The patriot'

The other model of representing an 'Israeli person' that emerges from the sample at hand may be labelled 'the patriot'. This model is relatively marginal in the sample: only eighty-two out of 295 respondents chose to report national solidarity and pride as leading features of Israeliness (the remaining thirty-three respondents in the sample were ambivalent on this issue). Manifestations of this model are even more predictable and sketchy than those of 'the ugly Israeli' one, resembling in more detail the good old axioms of 'the beautiful Israeli', based on the *Sabra* archetype. By contrast to the latter model, this one concentrates less on depicting everyday life situations than on explicitly formulating the national ethos (or the respondents' idea of it) through a coherent list of attributes.

The most repeated ones are *love for the country* and a *life long commitment to it*. For instance: 'An Israeli is someone who is bound to the country body and soul'; or: 'An Israeli is someone who loves his country with all his heart, is faithful to it, cares about it and knows there can never be another country for him'. For twenty-eight respondents, *permanent residence in Israel* is an explicit precondition for being an Israeli (eleven of them even go so far as to declare that an Israeli is someone who was *born* in Israel). The declaration of love for the country¹³ is accompanied by various expressions of *devotion*, *social involvement* and *willingness to contribute to the collective*. For instance: 'An Israeli is someone who lives in this country, loves this country and serves in the army. Every person who is willing to contribute to and work for the

country, and takes the good with the bad'. Among these forms of devotion the most recurring are *servicing in the army*; *respect for the law* of the country, and for *national values*; and *the sentimental bond to the land* (for instance: 'an Israeli is someone whose eyes grow moist when he sees the shores of the land'). Other such typical forms of patriotic devotion that are represented in the sample, however marginally, are *settling in the land*,¹⁴ and *faithfulness to the national product* (which is today considered a rather anachronistic form of Israeli patriotism). The following representation summarises many of these components: 'An Israeli is someone who loves Israel and gives his whole life to it. One like me, who has never been out of the country, who tours it and buys only Israeli products'. In addition, this model – by contrast to the other – often entails a declared commitment to the Jewish tradition; for instance: 'An Israeli is someone who speaks Hebrew and obeys the laws of the country and the Jewish tradition'.

Discussion

Two important points should be stressed regarding this model. First, in contradistinction to the former model, here the *Sabra* archetype is neither eliminated, nor twisted, but is quite straightforwardly appropriated. Israelis are portrayed here as *charming-in-spite-of-their-faults*, *warm hearted*, *open* and *caring* (for instance: 'Israelis are charming because they are warm people who give love'), and as capable of *solidarity and friendship, especially in times of crisis* (for instance: 'An Israeli is cynical and an angel at once, yet when danger threatens, everything is forgotten and they all unite to fight the evil from the outside'). The *Sabra's* celebrated duality between *chutzpah* and goodness is also echoed here, yet in a favourable tone and without bitterness at all, as in the following example: 'Israelis are cheeky, good sports, and especially intimate with one another'. In a few cases there is even explicit mention of the *Sabra*, with unmistakable reference to the metaphor of a prickly-yet-sweet cactus fruit. For instance, 'the Israeli is a strange type like the *Sabra*: outwardly he is cheeky, yet inside him conceals wonderful qualities'. And compare these to the sarcastic reference to the *Sabra*, quoted earlier. However, in all these representations, the evocation of the *Sabra* image does not imply the Modernist, anti-traditional idea of the New Jew, the way it was conceived of in pre-statehood times. On the contrary, in this context it comes as an integral part of statehood national sentiment, which today seeks to reconcile secular patriotism with traditional Jewishness. Such an attitude is attested by the declarations of loyalty to Jewish lifestyle which sometimes accompany these patriotic representations.

Second, this model is entirely devoid of irony and sarcasm, implying, instead, a wholehearted sense of 'togetherness' and sharing of values and fate. This sentiment is sometimes stressed through an explicit declaration of the respondent's own affinity: 'an Israeli is someone who loves the country and served in the army. *Someone like me*' (my emphasis). Such a naïve demonstration of patriotism and the adoption of old-fashioned mythical images were certainly

not the *bon ton* of highbrow public discourse during the 1990s. Precisely for this reason, although relatively marginal in the total of responses, the use of this model strikes as remarkably present, conveying a stronger claim for identity.

Conclusions

The large number of responses to the column (and similar such representations elsewhere) suggests that people, at least in some sectors of society, are more than ready to make a statement about Israeli cultural identity. Although the sample at hand is random and knowledge about the respondents is scant, tentative conclusions can nevertheless be proposed about the two popular verbal models of representing 'Israeliness' and their distribution. Let me summarise them in the following three points:

(1) A pursuit of 'culturedness'

It appears that the clichés offered by all the responses capture a popular idiom that is not directly deducible from the political discourse. They hardly bear any imprint of the ideological conflicts that are on the political agenda. Instead, the largest number of responses reveal that their major concern as Israelis is *whether or not they are regarded as 'civilised'*. Whatever their ideological convictions, they all imply a certain scale of mastering good manners and possessing a 'genuine culture', according to which the Israeli person is measured. This implied scale of culturedness relies massively on what are taken to be 'Western' or 'European' norms of propriety, which seem to form the dominant perspective in these representations (Sela-Sheffy, in preparation). Sometimes, however, an oscillation between this cultural paradigm and that of the local, so-called native one, which is believed to characterise the Israeli mindset (see e.g. Bar-Yosef 2002), is also reflected in them. The scorn for the Israeli person on the basis of absence of these properties mean that the respondents value the appropriation of these properties as a crucial factor of self-estimation and social demarcation.

This 'pursuit of culturedness' (i.e. the appropriation of 'things cultural', be they objects, manners, or even ideas and values) as a form of status contest is certainly not unique to Israeli society. Bourdieu's work on distinction and differentiation of 'tastes' (1979), bearing also on Goffman's analyses of strategies of status claim (1959), has inspired many studies of culture differences in suggesting that it forms a basic mechanism through which culture organises society. Yet, it seems to be somehow overlooked as an organising factor in the discussion of collective identity in the Israeli social space. The findings of the sample at hand at least bear evidence to two important facts, namely (a) that components of group identity may vary in accordance with the context, and Israelis, like all people, may simultaneously hold different sets of identity parameters (and not just explicitly political ones), which are not necessarily harmonious with each other. The findings

also suggest that (b) 'the ways of doing things in culture' outweigh 'values' in determining one's orientation and sense of belonging (Swidler 1986). It may hence fairly be suggested that the choice of ideological stances – which stances usually lie at the heart of cultural analyses – is subjugated to cultural distinction and status contests, and not vice versa (Bourdieu 1983; Swidler 1986; see also Deshen 1989).

(2) *A center-periphery tension*

The distribution of the two models reveals a tension between centre and periphery, which, as follows from the above, is perceived in *cultural* rather than political terms primarily. The embracing or rejecting of the *Sabra* image by the different respondents clarifies this point: Even without any clue as to the respondents' social background, their inclination to embrace or reject the Native Israeli image reveals the same dynamics of chase and flight that governs the consumption of cultural goods (Bourdieu 1980). This dynamics means that when exclusive cultural assets are widely distributed and embraced by ever growing circles of non-elite consumers, their value decreases for those who seek to maintain their status advantage. The same such dynamics emerge from the sample at hand (see table in Appendix). As the figures show, 'the ugly Israeli' model predominates in the whole sample (sixty-one per cent), and all the more so where respondents from established localities in central urban areas are concerned, whereas in development towns and other underprivileged sectors 67.3 per cent of the respondents represent themselves as 'patriots'. Given the obscurity regarding the respondents in the larger (miscellaneous) group, this latter group of respondents stands out as both more distinctively marginalised and declaratively identifying with the 'Native Israeli' image.

This distribution of attitudes thus suggests that precisely those respondents who seem to come from more established layers of society can afford to be more cynical regarding the Israeli collective identity and express stronger disillusion with its archetypes without risking their sense of belonging. Together with their compulsive sarcasm, expressions of detachment function as a sign of refinement. In one representation this is indicated explicitly: 'An Israeli is someone who distinguishes himself from the Israeli demeanour around him'. This attitude may be part of the (paradoxically provincial) Israeli urban-bourgeois pursuit of 'cosmopolitanism', in light of which the *Sabra* image is devalued for its alleged lack of finesse. Distancing from a repertoire which had previously been valued is a symptomatic reaction of the established (the veterans) vis-à-vis the threat of acclimatisation of the 'outsiders' (the newcomers) to the same repertoire (Elias and Scotson 1994 [1965]).

On the other hand, those who come from communities which are stigmatised as peripheral are inclined to subscribe to this canonical symbol of the veteran culture with greater respect, and to claim competence as its natural bearers. Unsurprisingly, this attitude is not symmetrical with these communities' assumed *political* antagonism towards the veteran, so-called

Ashkenazi dominance (as evidenced by data on voting; see Arian and Shamir 1999). It should be remembered that these responses were compiled as representatives of particular localities or occupational sectors, which fact has probably placed a certain constraint on the respondents' choice of attitudes. However, regardless of the question how 'sincere' these respondents are in cherishing the *Sabra* image, the very fact that they chose to hold fast to it when exposed to the media suggests that they feel they have more to gain by wilfully participating in the cultural mainstream rather than by setting themselves apart. These findings support observations made by studies of ethnic identities in Israel regarding the more complex strategy of 'alienated identification' (Ben-Sira 1988) on the part of marginalised groups. The discrepancy between the attitudes reflected in their representations and their assumed political stances therefore suggests that these respondents see the Native Israeli image as a *cultural* asset, the appropriation of which is an imperative in their claim for status, and the less secure the status the stronger the claim to appropriate it (Pellerin and Stearns 2001).

It is worth noting that the adherence to the canonical Native Israeli image is most conspicuous (though for different reasons) in the two polar positions on the range of positions presented in the sample. This adherence is very obvious both on the periphery, on the one hand, and in the stances of highly regarded position holders, on the other. At this point it would be interesting to compare the anonymous responses examined here with the additional twenty-eight definitions of 'Israeliness' which were solicited from political personalities and other celebrities, as mentioned earlier. These representations are illuminating in so far as they tend to express the 'believing in the Israeli spirit' axiom, with extensive reference to the *Sabra* myth. To take two examples, here are the words of Abba Eban, former minister of foreign affairs, who, although declaratively denying the *Sabra* myth, in the final analysis accepts it entirely:

In principle, I cannot find differences between Israelis and others. The *Sabra* myth, which is prickly from the outside and sweet from within, is only a myth. There is no peculiarity of the Israeli person besides the fact that he is *boldly straightforward, sometimes showing courage, able to unite in times of predicament, and has the capability for entrepreneurship* (*Maariv* weekend supplement 5 January 1996, p. 8; my emphasis).

Another interesting example is by Tova'le Hasin, a top Israeli fashion designer, who not only declares total identification with this collective portrait, but also makes a point of sounding like a 'Native commoner', idolising the 'ugly Israeli' stereotype as if it was the incarnation of the *Sabra*:

In my opinion, Tova'le is a purely Israeli concept and I sincerely mean this declaration. I am proud of my Israeliness. Today people have become typical consumers of Western culture and the culture of fakeness. They go to image counsellors in order to be more refined, different. I find it unacceptable. A pure Israeli is all about being impudent, vulgar, cracking sunflower seeds and throwing them everywhere. The most Israeli Israelis *sic!* I know, from youth movements to commando army units, the common denominator of all, is that they love to sing songs of Eretz-Israel. (*Maariv* weekend supplement, 29 December 1995, p. 4).

(3) The persistence of the legendary Native Israeli image

However, the majority of respondents – those who talk about ‘the ugly Israeli’ – do not really defy the ‘Native Israeli’ image either. Indeed they make clear their intention to distance themselves from it. Yet, there is no real heresy in their representations, since more than a devaluation of the Native Israeli image, they express a sense of loss that its virtues are diminishing in the actualities of Israeli everyday life. On occasion, this is formulated explicitly, as in the following representation: ‘An Israeli is a *Sabra*: noisy, crude and ill-tempered. The sweetness and softness of the inside – these we have forgotten over the years’. The message, at least in a large part of these responses, is therefore more sophisticated: ‘Our cultural legacy is now abused by the masses and turned into a deteriorated, non-authentic version of Israeliness; we would like the good old *Sabra* identity to persist, but deny that it is upheld by other people than ourselves’. Hence, while granting themselves the powerful position of being ‘cultural policemen’, these people eventually also play a continuous role in the struggle for monopolising the same old shared canonical self-image. As historians and sociologists show, the massive demystification of Native Hebrew myths and icons in recent decades has not resulted in a total repudiation and deconstruction of their import, but rather reflects a more ambivalent complex of contradicting stances (Zerubavel 1991; Roniger and Feige 1992).

Eventually, both models of popular representations manifested in this sample make vital use of the outdated legendary Native Israeli image. Whether by way of its naïve implementation, or by way of reserved allusions to it, this image still serves as an effective tool of creating and negotiating a sense of group identity, apparently more than we tend to think. Precisely these cultural struggles are what makes this image a persistent factor in the shaping and reshaping of a shared sense of ‘being an Israeli’. In this respect – and perhaps only in this respect – popular representations of identity such as those examined here are not all that different from the explicit political disputes: on both these levels of public consciousness the senses of identity are constructed through perpetuation of this canon, however implicitly.

Appendix

Table 1. *Segmentation of the respondents*

		<i>specific sectors:</i>
		<i>65 Residents of development towns</i>
		<i>10 taxi drivers</i>
		<i>10 stall holders in the market</i>
		<i>10 educators</i>
<i>Total</i>	<i>(central established communities–73%)</i>	
295	200	95

Table 2. *Distribution of models of representation*

<i>Total</i>	<i>'The Ugly Israeli'</i>	<i>'The Patriot'</i>	<i>Ambivalent reactions</i>
295 (100%)	180 (61%)	82 (27.8%)	33 (11.2%)
Specific sectors (development towns etc.)			
95	15 (15.78%)	64 (67.36%)	16 (16.84%)

Table 3. *Correlation between the segmentation of respondents and the distribution of models*

<i>Models</i>	<i>'The Ugly Israeli'</i>	<i>'The Patriot'</i>	<i>Ambivalent reactions</i>
	180	82	33
Respondents			
Miscellaneous (established communities–73%)			
200	165 (82.5%)	18 (9%)	17 (8.5%)

Notes

1 This paper focuses on representations of identity by Jewish Israelis alone, leaving aside questions of identity of the Arab minority in Israel – including the Arab-Jewish tension – which deserves a special discussion.

2 The distinction between 'Hebrew' and 'Israeli' culture is a historical one. 'Hebrew', rather than 'Jewish', refers to the culture of the Jewish community in pre-state Palestine; the culture during statehood is usually called 'Israeli'. However, today the term 'Hebrew' mainly implies the higher stratum of contemporary Israeli culture – the one endowed with historical depth and prestige.

3 The abstention of many groups from contributing to this column may result from different reasons. Some of them may not have access to this newspaper (polls conducted by the Advertising Association show that about one-quarter of the Jewish adult population read *Maariv* on weekends; the figures range between 24.9 per cent [*Haaretz*, 3.12.1998] to 23.8 per cent [*Haaretz*, 11.1.99]). Among readers of *Maariv*, the column may not be on their list of favourable reading. Other reasons would be that they may disregard themselves as competent respondents on the media; or they may not have an interest in contributing to negotiations on this issue at all.

4 The ethnic origin of Israeli names is not always so easily identifiable. At any rate, in this specific sample there appears to be, if anything, an effect of neutralisation of this factor: of the total of 295 names, only sixty-two are typically 'Mizraxi' and sixty-four are typically 'Ashkenazi', while 110 are modern hebraicised names, which could be either *Mizraxi* or *Ashkenazi* in origin. In addition, twenty-three respondents have Cohen or Levi as their family names; these traditional Hebrew names are equally common in both *Mizraxi* and *Ashkenazi* groups. It so happens that the greatest part of this sample is indistinct regarding the ethnic origins of the respondents.

5 The representation of residents of these areas in the sample is higher than their ratio in the general population; however, their ratio in the general population in Israel is still considerable. According to the Israel Statistical Yearbook for 1998, 49.2 per cent of the Jewish residents of urban localities (2,209.4 of 4,492.2 thousand people) lived in the districts of the three big cities: Jerusalem, Tel-Aviv and Haifa, while 53.2 per cent of the general population (3,213.9 of 6,041.4 thousand people) were centred in the same year in the central region of Israel (including Tel-Aviv and Jerusalem).

6 I use the notion of model in the sense of a shared internalised knowledge available for an individual as a member of a given group, operating as a set of instructions governing the individual's action as well as interpretation of the world (Even-Zohar 1997; Sheffy 1997; see also Holland and Quinn 1987).

7 'The ugly Israeli' is a commonly used expression, dating back at least to the 1960s (Millner 1994). The host of Web sites and chat rooms dedicated to the subject by 'concerned Israelis' testify to the enormous impact of this notion in the shaping of the Israeli self-image; I am grateful to Nahuel Ribke for this information (for a bitter critique on the deteriorating cultural profile of Israeliness, see e.g. Rosenblum 1996).

8 All translations are mine.

9 The general ignorance of Arabic by Jewish Israelis is a deplorable fact that is often lamented for more than one reason. In this context its purely political aspect – that of the Israeli-Arabic conflict – seems to be insignificant in comparison to the *cultural* one – the symbolic status of Arabic as a so-called autochthonic cultural asset.

10 Studies of pre- and early state culture show, though, that contrary to the accepted view, ambivalence towards the *Sabra* was not at all overshadowed by idolisation (Almog 1997; Elboim-Dror 1996; Holzman 1997; Shavit 1998; see also Horowitz 1993; Kadish 1995). Still, the sympathy was unhidden.

11 The debunking of the *Sabra* ideal by Israeli popular discourse is often implied by the extensive use Israelis make of the term 'Freier', which, according to Roniger and Feige (1992) functions as a mirror image of the de-mythologised archetype of the '*halutz*', the altruistic, pioneering figure, on which the *Sabra* heavily relies. Surprisingly enough, this term appears only once in the sample at hand.

12 Although by 1998 terrorist attacks had not yet imposed such a drastic effect on Israeli everyday life as they do today, they already constituted an acute issue of public consciousness.

13 Under this category ('*the country*') I include references to both '*the land*' ('*ha aretz*') and '*the state*' ('*ha medina*') together, since in these responses both terms are used more or less as synonyms (in a few cases both terms are used in one and the same response). One response includes a specific reference to the love for the *government*.

14 The avoidance of this once primary form of Israeli patriotism by these responses may result from the fact that ever since the 1970s it has become a matter of tremendous political dispute, through the massive settlement in the occupied territories, and the monopolisation of this ethos by politically rightist and religious, extremist nationalist sectors. At the same time, moving out of town into rural localities has become a fashionable upper-middle-class lifestyle, devoid of any patriotic sentiments.

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