

## **The Nationalized Jewish Home:**

### **Zionist Attempts to Create an Alternative Domestic Ritual System**

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In one of the highlights from *A Time for Trimming*, author Haim Be'er portrays an absurd situation. In his desperation to assimilate into Israeli society, a character by the name of Benny Brimmer returns from school with clear instructions on how he should celebrate Independence Day with his family. He convinces his mother to prepare pseudo-traditional holiday dishes and gathers family and neighbors around the dinner table in order to uphold the “*Seder*” as instructed by the Minister of Education. Unsurprisingly, the artificial atmosphere quickly turns grotesque, and the entire affair culminates in bitter disappointment, symbolizing the chasm that separates the ritual at Brimmer home from the imagined Israeli ritual the Ministry of Education had envisioned.

Unrealistic as this portrayal may sound, it is grounded in specific historic context. Between 1930-60, many memory agents made efforts to inject the national rituals of Zionism and the young State of Israel into the domestic sphere. This trend peaked in Minister of Education, Ben-Zion Dinur's attempts to transform Independence Day into a family holiday. These attempts included the invention of a “traditional” holiday menu, “*Haggadah*” and “*Kiddush*,” and harnessed the educational system to spread these ideas.

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National revolutions often replace ritual systems and establish new holiday cycles. Mona Ozouf (whose writings rely on Durkheim) has called this process “the transfer of sacrality,” and emphasized the creation of national pseudo-religious rites as replacements for existing rituals that reflect the former social order. According to her, there is a clear distinction between the ethnoreligious and the national ritual; an assumption that can be highly criticized from a post-secular point of view, with Zionism as one of many examples.

Like other national movements, the Zionism too, used the ritual system to establish its own interpretation of history. In doing so it did not seek to erase the previous system altogether, but rather to appropriate and reinterpret it in order to provide the Movement's own arguments with depth and

context. Unlike other cases, the prominence of domestic space in Jewish holiday tradition compelled Zionist memory agents to address it. The most common approach utilized conversion techniques: the nuclear family was replaced by an ideological community, while attempts were made to shift the intergenerational sense of belonging evoked by the familial tableside ritual to the public sphere. Thus, for example, Passover Seder – originally a family gathering centered around the edict “and thou shalt show thy son” – was converted into a community gathering where members could reaffirm their common values.

However, gradually few cultural activists expressed their discomfort with the “neglect” of the traditional family home and offered a series of domestic-national rituals they believed necessary for the establishment and implementation of Zionist values. Much like in Yosef Haim Yerushalmi’s later analysis, members of this group have tracked down the core of Jewish memory to the family ritual which brings together memory, text, and personal experience. To them, the private home is the only place that allows the Zionist narrative to fully acclimatize, evoke civic awareness, and be passed down to next generations; only there can the national, cultural, and religious components of Judaism completely fuse and provide Zionism with a deep-enough framework of meaning.

The proffered rituals usually used familial holiday customs as platform – integrating Jewish ethnoreligious elements with civil ones into a whole new unrecognizable "compound". This compound was meant to generate a new creation; namely: take different Jewish components and completely integrate them into the developing civil symbolic language. This model produces a national Jewish-Israeli narrative, which is both ethnoreligious and modern-civil at the same time. Its Jewish components are nationalized, while its civil components also transform and take on a new meaning.

These ideas were delivered by two main institutions. The first was the “Teachers’ Movement for KKL-JNF”, founded back in 1925, which functioned as an umbrella organization to many of the founding fathers of Israeli education. Apart from its emphasis on the importance of rituals performed in schools, the movement perceived pupils as agents of change, and tried to utilize them to infiltrate their home. Another prominent institution was “*Yeda-Am* - The Folklore Society in Israel”, which was founded later and documented the customs of various Diasporas, emphasizing family rituals (holidays, life cycle rituals, and so on). Gradually, the Society also began developing new Jewish-Israeli rituals by inventing new holidays and trying to imbue existing holidays with substance by once again employing the domestic sphere.

While the various figures associated with this group did not all hail from the same stratum, we can certainly pinpoint their common denominators. They were all born at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Eastern Europe (many in its more central parts), influenced both by the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* and the Hassidic Movement. Much like Ahad-Ha'am, who they saw as their founding father, although most were far from religious, their outlook on Jewish tradition was not founded in negation. Their views of Jewish existence in the Diaspora were complex, as Zionists they saw any Jewish culture that developed outside of *Eretz Israel* as partial and limited; at the same time, their outlook on the Jewish diasporic civilization was very romantic. The spirits of change that sunk Eastern-Europe's Jewish culture, as well as incoming news of its extermination during the Holocaust, have driven them to try and "collect the pieces of the Jewish Diaspora". In this context, they feared not only the extinction of traditions and cultural treasures, but also the collapse of the Jewish family as an institution and the rise of a new generation, disconnected from its heritage, whose national sentiments do not run deep-enough.

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The suggested study wishes to examine the ideological circle described herein and its institutions via attempts made by two of its most prominent members to reinvent and reinterpret family-holiday rituals and adapt them to the national era. Discussion will center around two case studies: attempts to write a "*Haggadah*" that would accompany Independence Day dinners, during Dinur's term as Minister of Education (1952-1955), and Yom-Tov Levinsky's suggested national domestic rituals, as they appeared in newspapers and later collected and published as a book (*Sefer HaMoadim*, 1948-1958 [Hebrew]). Dinur's work as Minister of Education gave the group's views extraordinary influence. As minister, he saw the national-domestic ritual as one of the most effective tools at his disposal towards the governmental efforts to implement the republican (or: "*mamlachti*") worldview. Levinsky's work is highly impressive due to its scope and his prestige among the Israeli public as a "holiday expert". His texts are especially interesting, as they tend to verbosely describe year-round family rituals of a national nature as if they were real, though they were no more than wishful thinking.

I also intend to study the connection between the ideas of Dinur and Levinski and other attempts made in Europe at the same time to renew and "nationalize" holiday rituals. This way I hope to track the inspiration sources of the group and check if and how it was influenced by national trends in East and Central Europe.

The discussion will be based on a series of archival documents (most of which I have already located and scanned), including files placed in Israel's State Archives by the Ministry of Education, Yom-Tov Levinsky's files given to The National Library of Israel, and various published pamphlets that expressed these notions.

Using a method of thick description and basing on various archival resources, I intend to suggest a new outlook on this depth trend in Zionism and Israeli society, which utilizes the domestic unit to create a new Jewish-Israeli compound. I argue that this approach, which integrates national and religious rituals until they are wholly transformed, may shed new light on the nature of the Jewish ritual and the ways in which it is constantly interpreted and reinterpreted.